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# THE BLACK ACE

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**LOOK!**

**THESE  
TWO  
TERRIFIC  
ISSUES**

**NOW  
ON  
SALE**



**The LONG  
HAUL**



**ENGAGE the  
ENEMY**



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# THE BLACK ACE

THE THROTTLES OF THE LANCASTER WERE SLAMMED WIDE OPEN. HER ENGINES WERE IN FINE PITCH—MAKING A NOISE LIKE AN AIRCRAFT IN PAIN. HIGH ABOVE THE LIVID NIGHTMARE OF THE RUHR VALLEY, *P FOR POPSIE* SEEMED, TO THE SEVEN MEN WHO SAT INSIDE HER, TO BE THE ONLY SHIP IN THE SKY—HUGE AND VULNERABLE, AND CRUELLY DEFENCELESS...

SEVEN MEN CLUNG GRIMLY TO THEIR SLIPPING NERVES. SEVEN MEN TASTED FEAR IN THEIR MOUTHS—A FEAR THAT WENT FAR DEEPER THAN THE STEEL-SLIVERED HELL THROUGH WHICH THEY FLEW...



# Chapter 1. *Flight of Fear*

SOME OF THAT FEAR WAS IN FLIGHT-LIEUTENANT BILL WEBB, THE CAPTAIN AND PILOT OF *P FOR POPSE*. HE BELLOWED HARSHLY ON THE INTERCOM...

WHAT THE HECK ARE YOU PLAYING AT, ABE? WE'VE RUN SMACK INTO A DEFENDED AREA! CHECK YOUR COURSE FIGURES, FOR PETE'S SAKE!

THE VOICE OF THE NAVIGATOR WAS SLOW IN ANSWERING. ABE NOLAN WAS A BIG CANADIAN. IT TOOK A LOT TO FRIGHTEN HIM, BUT THE SWEAT WAS HEAVY ON ABE'S BROW AS HE LOOKED UP FROM HIS MAPS...

I-I'M AFRAID I MIS-READ MY OWN WRITING, SKIPPER! THE COURSE I GAVE YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN ANOTHER TWENTY DEGREES STARBOARD!

GOOD GRIEF!



WEBB'S INCREDULOUS SNARL TORE THROUGH THE INTERCOM. IN THE TAIL-TURRET, YOUNG MIKE SIMPSON HEARD IT AS HE CROUCHED BEHIND HIS BROWINGS.

WE-WE'VE  
HAD IT! WE'LL  
NEVER GET OUT  
OF THIS ALIVE!  
HE WAS RIGHT!  
VIBART WAS  
RIGHT!



VIBART. THE NAME WAS BURNING IN THE MIND OF EVERY MAN WHO FLEW IN THE GROANING LANCASTER. IT WAS THE NAME OF THE LEAN, BRIGHT-EYED FLIGHT ENGINEER WHO SAT NEXT TO BILL WEBB...

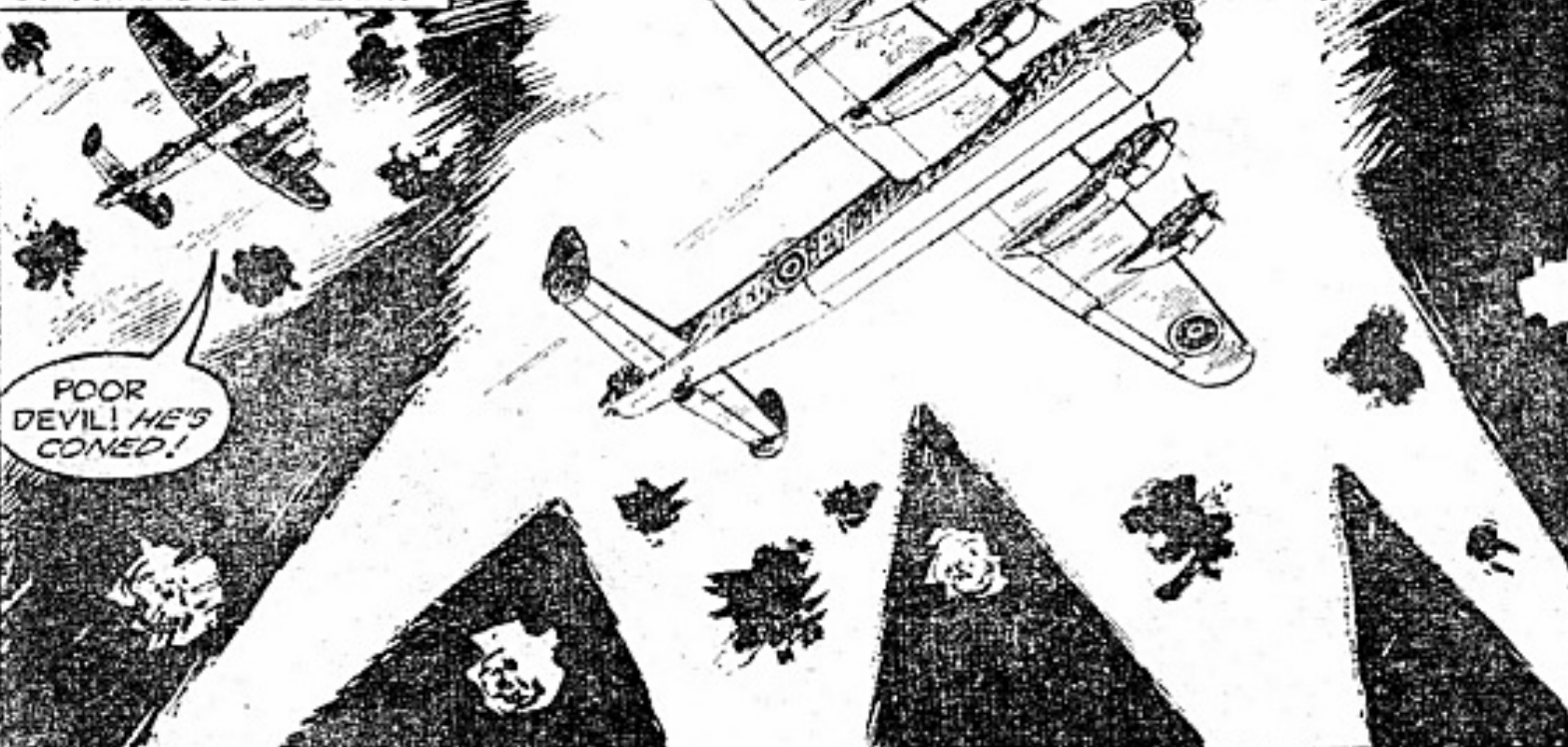
IT LOOKS BAD, SKIPPER! BUT THEN, THE CARDS TOLD US IT WOULD BE, DIDN'T THEY?

CURSE YOU, VIBART! YOU AND YOUR PROPHECY! I DON'T BELIEVE IT! WE'RE GOING TO GET OUT OF THIS, D'YOU HEAR?





THEN, AS WEBB'S EYES FLICKED RIGHT, HE SAW ANOTHER LANCASTER, IMPALED ON A PYRAMID OF SEARCHLIGHTS, CENTRED ROUND THE STEADY, BLUE COLUMN OF A MASTER BEAM.



THE FLAK CLOSED ON THE TRAPPED LANCASTER. SUDDENLY, A DULL RED GLOW SPROUTED ON ITS PORT WING. THE BIG AIRCRAFT SLIPPED DOWN LIKE A SHINING, WOUNDED BIRD. WHEN THE BLAST CAME, IT STRUCK P FOR POPSIE LIKE A WALL OF WATER...





ABRUPTLY, SHOCKINGLY, THE OTHER LANCASTER HAD DISAPPEARED, EXCEPT FOR A SINGLE, BURNING WING-TIP, SKIDDING LAZILY DOWN...

THAT COULD HAVE BEEN US, SKIPPER! IT'S BEEN BUILDING UP TO THIS, ALL THE TIME! VIBART WAS RIGHT! YOU'VE GOT TO TURN BACK!



THE FLARING VOICE OF ALBERT SPENCE, THE WIRELESS OPERATOR, STRUCK CLARITY INTO WEBB'S REELING BRAIN...

ARE YOU CRAZY, ALBERT? GET BACK TO YOUR POSITION! WE'RE GOING TO FIND THAT TARGET—AND PLASTER IT! THEN WE'RE GOING HOME, ALL OF US, IN ONE PIECE!



600 MILES TO THE EAST, AT A BOMBER BASE IN LINCOLNSHIRE, THE FIRST WAVES OF LANCASTERS WERE RETURNING FROM THE RAID...

WELL, THAT'S MOST OF 'A' FLIGHT ACCOUNTED FOR! GOT ANYTHING ON P-POPSIE YET?

NO, SIR! SHE RADIOED AN ENGINE FAILURE ABOUT THREE HOURS AGO! BUT THAT'S THE LAST WE'VE HEARD!





THE CODE NAME P-POPSIE WAS ON OTHER LIPS THAT NIGHT, OUTSIDE, IN THE ROARING DARKNESS, THE FITTERS AND MECHANICS WHO SERVICED HER WERE WATCHING OTHER BOMBERS DESCENDING ON THE BRIGHT FUNNEL OF THE FLARE PATH...

BILL WEBB'S BOYS ARE TWENTY MINUTES OVERDUE! D'YOU SUPPOSE ANYTHING'S HAPPENED?



WITH THEIR LUCK? NOT A CHANCE! IF THEY FELL IN THE RHINE, THEY'D COME OUT DRY! AIN'T THAT RIGHT, FLIGHT?

BUT THERE WAS A TINGE OF UNEASINESS IN THE MECHANIC'S COMMENT. IT FOUND AN ECHO IN THE LOW VOICE OF HIS RUGGED FLIGHT-SERGEANT...

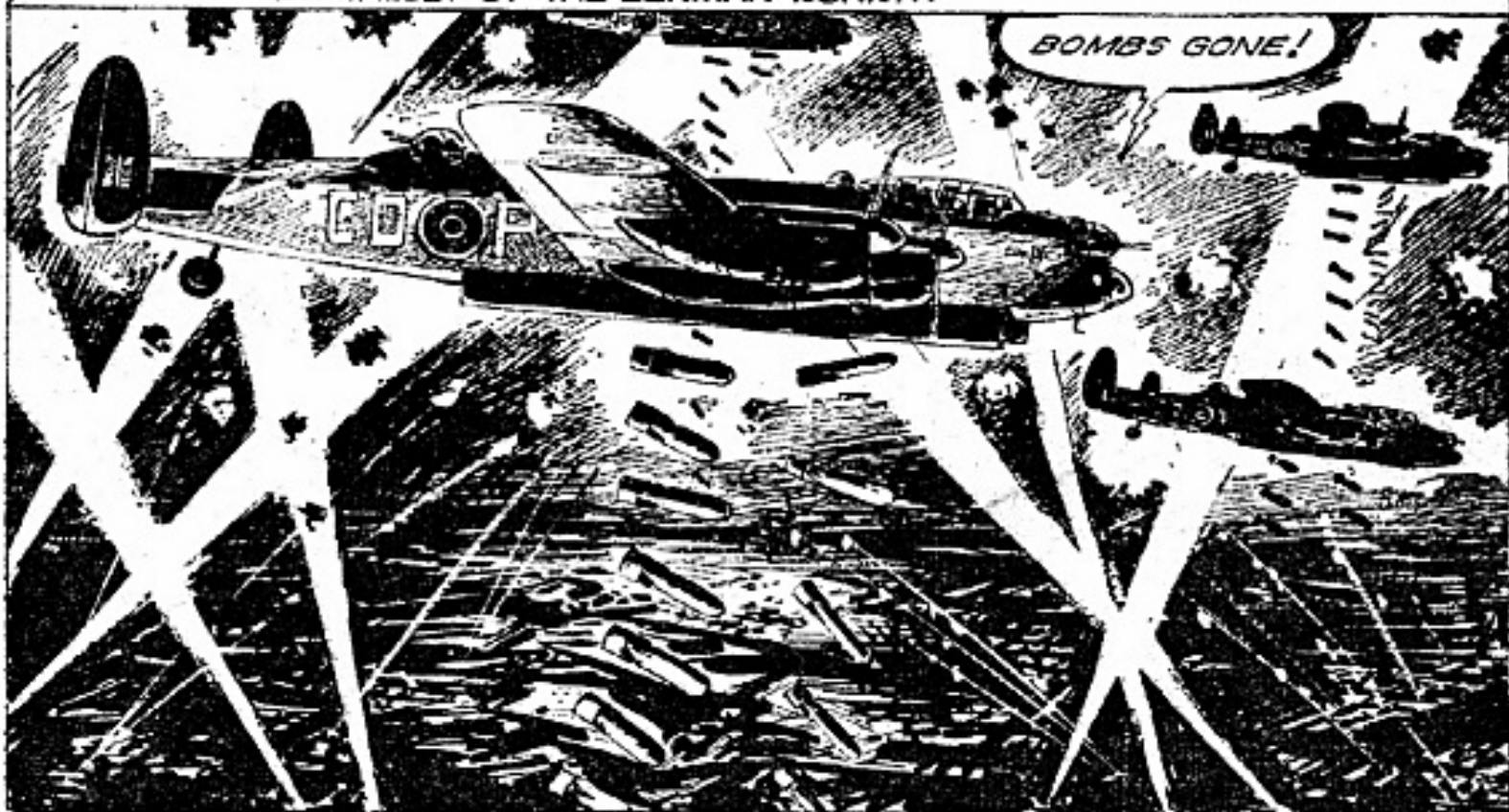
I DON'T KNOW, SAMMY! THAT CREW HASN'T BEEN THE SAME SINCE THAT NEW ENGINEER JOINED THEM, JUST OVER A MONTH AGO!





## Chapter 2. *Gard of Death*

TWO MONTHS AGO IT COULD HAVE BEEN SAFELY SAID THAT BILL WEBB'S BOYS WOULD HAVE COME BACK...EVEN FROM THE BRUTAL AIR BATTLES OF COLOGNE AND ESSEN. IT WAS IN MAY, 1943, THAT THEY FLEW THEIR 57th. OP. OVER THE FLAME-INFESTED VALLEY OF THE GERMAN RUHR...



BY HARD, SAVAGE EXPERIENCE, THEY HAD BECOME THE MOST SENIOR CREW IN THE SQUADRON. THAT NIGHT, EVERYTHING HAD GONE WELL. WEBB'S RUN-UP WAS PERFECT, AND JOHNNIE MARTIN, THE AUSSIE BOMB-AIMER, PLACED THEIR LOAD SMACK ON THE MUNITIONS PLANT THAT WAS THEIR TARGET...





FLYING OFFICER EDDIE YATES HAD BEEN THE FLIGHT ENGINEER THEN. HE ADJUSTED BOOSTS AND REVS WITH COOL-FINGERED PRECISION AS WEBB SLAMMED ACROSS THE TARGET AND WEAVERED NORTH TO AVOID THE FLAK...

A GOOD PRANG, BILL! AND POPSIE ISN'T EVEN SCRATCHED! LOOKS LIKE WE'RE GOING TO MAKE IT AGAIN!

WE'LL MAKE IT ALL RIGHT, EDDIE! WITH A BIT OF LUCK, AS THEY SAY!



LUCK! WHEN CREWS THOUGHT OF LUCK, THEY THOUGHT OF BILL WEBB'S BOYS. AND THE LATTER WERE ALWAYS READY TO ADMIT THAT THEY WERE LUCKY. PARTICULARLY MIKE SIMPSON, THE TAIL-GUNNER, AS HE GRINNED AT THE TOY KOALA BEAR MASCOT THAT HE ALWAYS CARRIED...

SURE WE'LL MAKE IT! OLD MONTY'LL SEE TO THAT, WON'T YOU, BOY?





# The Black Ace

BUT IT WAS MORE THAN LUCK THAT HAD MADE THE CREW OF *P FOR POPSY* INTO A FIGHTING, CORPORATE TEAM. TAKE ABE NOLAN, THE NAVIGATOR. THEY HAD NEVER KNOWN HIM TO ASK FOR A PINPOINT. HIS NASAL, CANADIAN VOICE WAS CHANTING THE RETURN COURSE LONG BEFORE WEBB NEEDED IT...

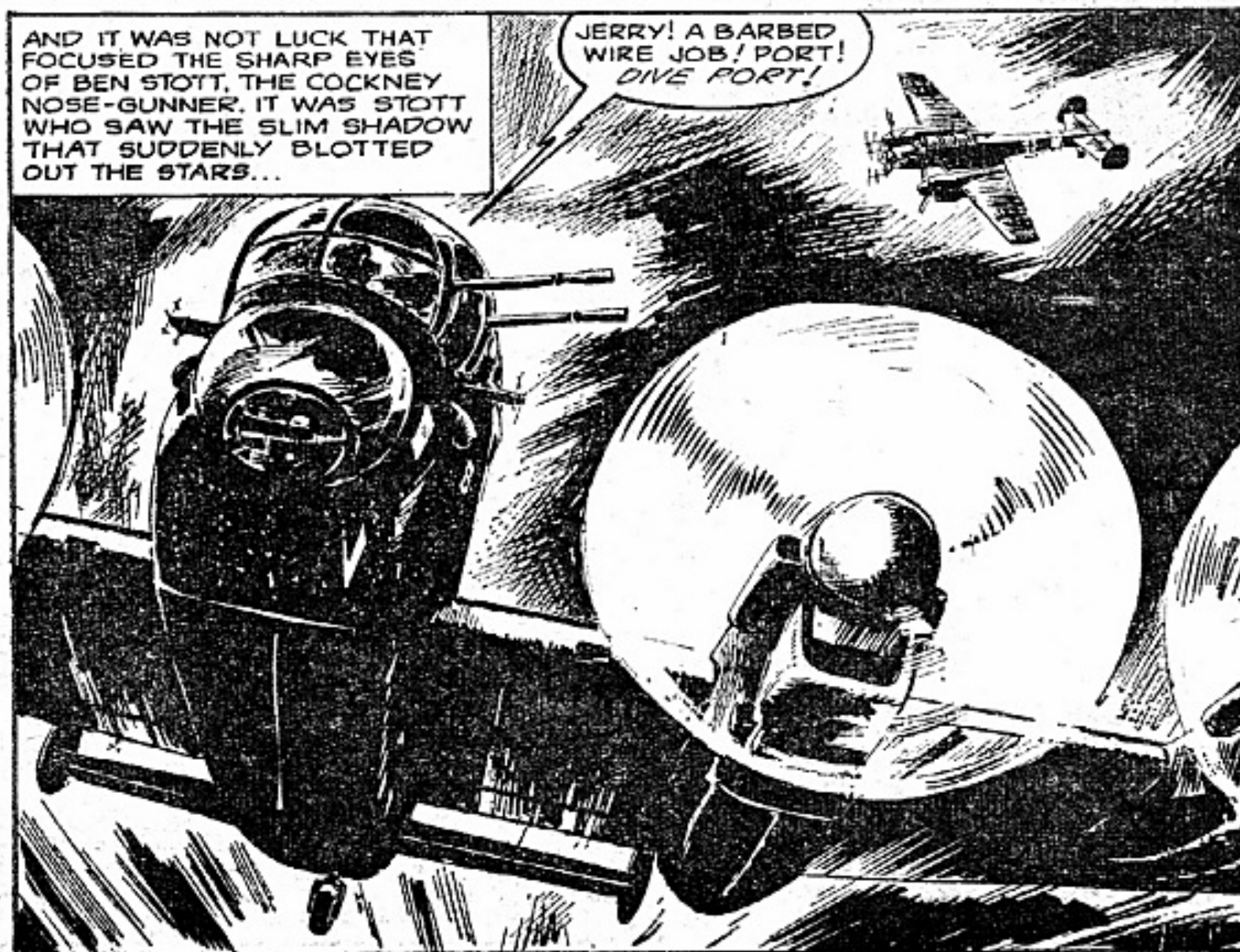
ONE MINUTE TO TURNING POINT, SKIPPER! NEW COURSE, ONE-O-EIGHT MAGNETIC!

ONE-O-EIGHT, IT IS!



AND IT WAS NOT LUCK THAT FOCUSED THE SHARP EYES OF BEN STOTT, THE COCKNEY NOSE-GUNNER. IT WAS STOTT WHO SAW THE SLIM SHADOW THAT SUDDENLY BLOTTED OUT THE STARS...

JERRY! A BARBED WIRE JOB! PORT! DIVE PORT!





A BARBED-WIRE JOB! AN ME 110, EQUIPPED WITH RADAR ANTENNAE AND A LETHAL ARMAMENT OF CANNONS THAT THREW DEATH AT THE BUCKING BOMBER...

SIX HUNDRED YARDS! HE'S FIRING CANNON!



WEBB HAD REACTED QUICKLY TO HIS NOSE-GUNNER'S SHOUT - BUT NOT QUICKLY ENOUGH. CORDITE FUMES FILLED THE LANCASTER'S COCKPIT AS CANNON SHELLS CRASHED AND RIPPED THROUGH THE CANOPY...

AGH!

EDDIE!



IN THE TAIL-TURRET, THE BROWNS WERE SWINGING URGENTLY. BEHIND THEM, MIKE SIMPSON WAS WATCHING THE MESSERSCHMITT AS IT CAME IN AGAIN...

HERE HE COMES, SKIPPER! EIGHT HUNDRED YARDS! PREPARE TO CORKSCREW!



WEBB SUDDENLY HURLED THE LANCASTER INTO A VIOLENT, DIVING TURN...

HELPLESSLY, THE GERMAN OVER-SHOT, AND AS THE WHITE SHAPE FLASHED ACROSS HIS SIGHTS, SIMPSON GAVE IT A DEADLY BURST. A FUEL TANK EXPLODED IN A FIERCE, ORANGE GLARE...



GLICK TIMING HAD DOWNED THE FIGHTER. P FOR POPPIE TURNED AWAY FROM THE FLAMING INFERNO OF COLOGNE...

LET'S GET OUT OF HERE! HOW'S OUR CASUALTY, ALBERT?

HE CAUGHT A NASTY ONE, SKIPPER! BUT HE'LL MAKE IT BACK TO BASE!





EDDIE YATES *DID* MAKE IT BACK TO BASE. AS HE WAS LIFTED INTO THE AMBULANCE, HE GRINNED AT THE MEN WITH WHOM HE HAD SHARED DANGER AND DEATH FOR TWELVE SAVAGE MONTHS...

SO LONG, BLOKES!  
HOPE YOU MAKE THAT SECOND TOUR!

WE'LL MAKE IT, EDDIE!

THINK OF US WHILE YOU'RE IN DOCK, EDDIE!  
YOU'RE DEAD LUCKY, MATE!

THEY WERE SILENT AS THEY WATCHED THE AMBULANCE PULL AWAY. BILL WEBB VOICED THE THOUGHTS OF HIS SOMBRE-FACED MEN...

EDDIE WAS A GOOD NUT! HOPE WE GET ANOTHER ENGINEER AS GOOD AS HE WAS.



BILL WEBB'S CREW DID NOT HAVE TO WAIT LONG FOR THEIR REPLACEMENT. THEY WERE IN THE AIRCREW MESS, TWO DAYS LATER...

JUST LISTEN TO THIS - 'ONLY ONE MAN IN THREE CAN EXPECT TO COMPLETE HIS SECOND TOUR OF OPERATIONS.'

SOMEONE OUGHT TO TELL THAT NEWSPAPER ABOUT OUR LUCK!



A HARSH VOICE SUDDENLY BROKE ACROSS THEIR BANTER. THEY TURNED QUICKLY TO FACE THE TALL, SALLOW-FACED MAN WHO HAD ENTERED QUIETLY BEHIND THEM.

LUCK, GENTLEMEN? THERE IS NO SUCH THING! WHEN OUR TIME COMES, THEN ALL THE LUCK IN THE WORLD WON'T SAVE US!



THE COLD ASSURANCE OF THE VOICE HAD A DISCOMFORTING EFFECT ON THE GROUP...

THE NAME'S PAUL VIBART-YOUR NEW FLIGHT ENGINEER! I'VE HEARD ALL ABOUT THE LUCKIEST CREW IN BOMBER COMMAND!





EVEN WEBB'S INSTINCTIVE GOOD HUMOUR WAS DISTURBED BY THE NEWCOMER'S STRANGE MANNER...

GLAD TO HAVE YOU WITH US, PAUL! BUT I'M SORRY YOU THINK WE RELY TOO MUCH ON OUR LUCK! WHAT'S YOUR SUGGESTION?



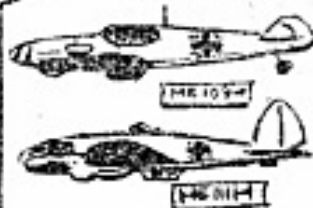
VIBART SEEMED TO SMILE. FROM THE POCKET OF HIS BATTLE-DRESS, HE PULLED A PACK OF PLAYING CARDS...

WHEN MY NUMBER COMES UP, I'LL KNOW! BECAUSE IT WILL BE ON THE CARDS!



IT WAS MIKE SIMPSON WHO SPOKE FIRST...  
MIKE SIMPSON, WHOSE DOGGED RELIANCE  
ON LUCK WAS ALMOST A SUPERSTITION...

YOU MEAN YOU  
CAN FORETELL  
THE FUTURE  
WITH THOSE  
CARDS?



THAT'S  
RIGHT!

CAN THE CARDS TELL  
ME...IF I'LL COMPLETE  
MY SECOND TOUR  
OF OPS?

TAKE IT EASY,  
MIKE!

DISTURBED BY THE SUDDEN  
TENSION IN MIKE SIMPSON'S VOICE,  
WEBB'S INTERRUPTION WAS  
SHARP AND INVOLUNTARY...



BUT HE WAS TOO LATE. VIBART HAD MOVED SWIFTLY TO A TABLE. HE BEGAN TO SHUFFLE THE CARDS EXPERTLY..

I'LL NEED A LITTLE INFORMATION FIRST... YOUR AGE, WHETHER YOU'VE ANY BROTHERS OR SISTERS...

I'M TWENTY-ONE, AND I COME FROM A FAMILY OF FOUR! ANYTHING ELSE?



VIBART ASKED A FEW MORE QUESTIONS. THEN HE BEGAN TO LAY OUT THE CARDS. IN THE SUDDEN, HUSHED SILENCE, BILL WEBB FOUGHT DOWN A RISING SENSE OF UNEASINESS...



HE LOOKED HARD AT THIS STRANGER—THE DEEP-SET EYES PROBING THE SLIM PASTEBOARDS FOR SIGNS OF LIFE AND DEATH. HE FELT THAT SOME PROCESS HAD STARTED WHICH NO POWER ON EARTH COULD PREVENT FROM REACHING A CONCLUSION...

SUDDENLY, VIBART STIFFENED... SOMETHING LIKE FEAR FLARED IN HIS DARK EYES. MIKE SIMPSON CROAKED HARSHLY IN THE UNBEARABLE SILENCE...

WHAT DO THE CARDS SAY, VIBART? WILL I FINISH THE TOUR?



THE TIGHTNESS MELTED SUDDENLY FROM VIBART'S FACE. HE GOT UP ABRUPTLY AND HURRIEDLY PICKED UP THE CARDS...

I'M SORRY! THE SIGNS ARE CONFUSED! OR MAYBE I'M JUST NOT IN THE MOOD! SOME OTHER TIME, PERHAPS!





THE TENSION CRUMBED VISIBLY AS VIBART STRODE AWAY. WEBB THREW OUT A HAND AS MIKE SIMPSON MADE TO FOLLOW HIM...

VIBART!  
WAIT A  
MINUTE!

HOLD IT,  
MIKE! LET  
HIM GO! WE'VE  
HAD ENOUGH  
FAIRGROUND  
MAGIC FOR  
ONE NIGHT!

WEBB HAD SPOKEN MORE BRUSQUELY THAN HE HAD MEANT TO. HIS WORDS DREW A MILD RUMBLE OF SURPRISE FROM ABE NOLAN...

YOU DON'T TAKE THAT  
FORTUNE-TELLING  
STUFF SERIOUSLY,  
SURELY, SKIPPER?

I DON'T  
BELIEVE A  
WORD OF IT,  
ABE! BUT  
VIBART DOES!  
THAT'S WHAT  
GIVES ME  
THE CREEPS!

DURING THE NEXT FEW DAYS, ROUTINE GUNNERY AND NIGHT-FLYING PRACTICE HELPED THE CREW OF P FOR POPSIE TO FORGET THEIR FIRST, UNEASY ENCOUNTER WITH THEIR NEW FLIGHT ENGINEER...

YOU'VE  
HIT THREE  
SMOKE-FLOATS  
IN A ROW!  
YOU'RE REALLY  
ON THE BALL  
TONIGHT,  
MIKE!

WEBB SOON REALISED THAT VIBART KNEW HIS JOB. BUT THE ENGINEER'S PAST WAS STILL OBSCURE. WEBB TRIED TO PROBE IT WITH CASUAL CONVERSATION...

I HEAR YOU WERE ON THE MILAN SHOW WITH FIVE GROUP! PRETTY HOT, WASN'T IT?

IT WAS HOT, ALL RIGHT! I SUPPOSE YOUR CREW WOULD SAY THAT I WAS LUCKY...

THE SARCASM WAS HEAVY IN VIBART'S VOICE. WEBB DID NOT SPEAK AS HE TURNED THE LANCASTER INTO LANDING ORBIT ABOVE THE AIRFIELD. IT WAS JOHNNO MARTIN'S SUDDEN WARNING THAT JERKED HIM FROM HIS ANGRY SILENCE...

WATCH IT, SKIPPER! THERE'S A KITE DEAD AHEAD WITHOUT NAVIGATION LIGHTS! MUST BE A SPROG PILOT!

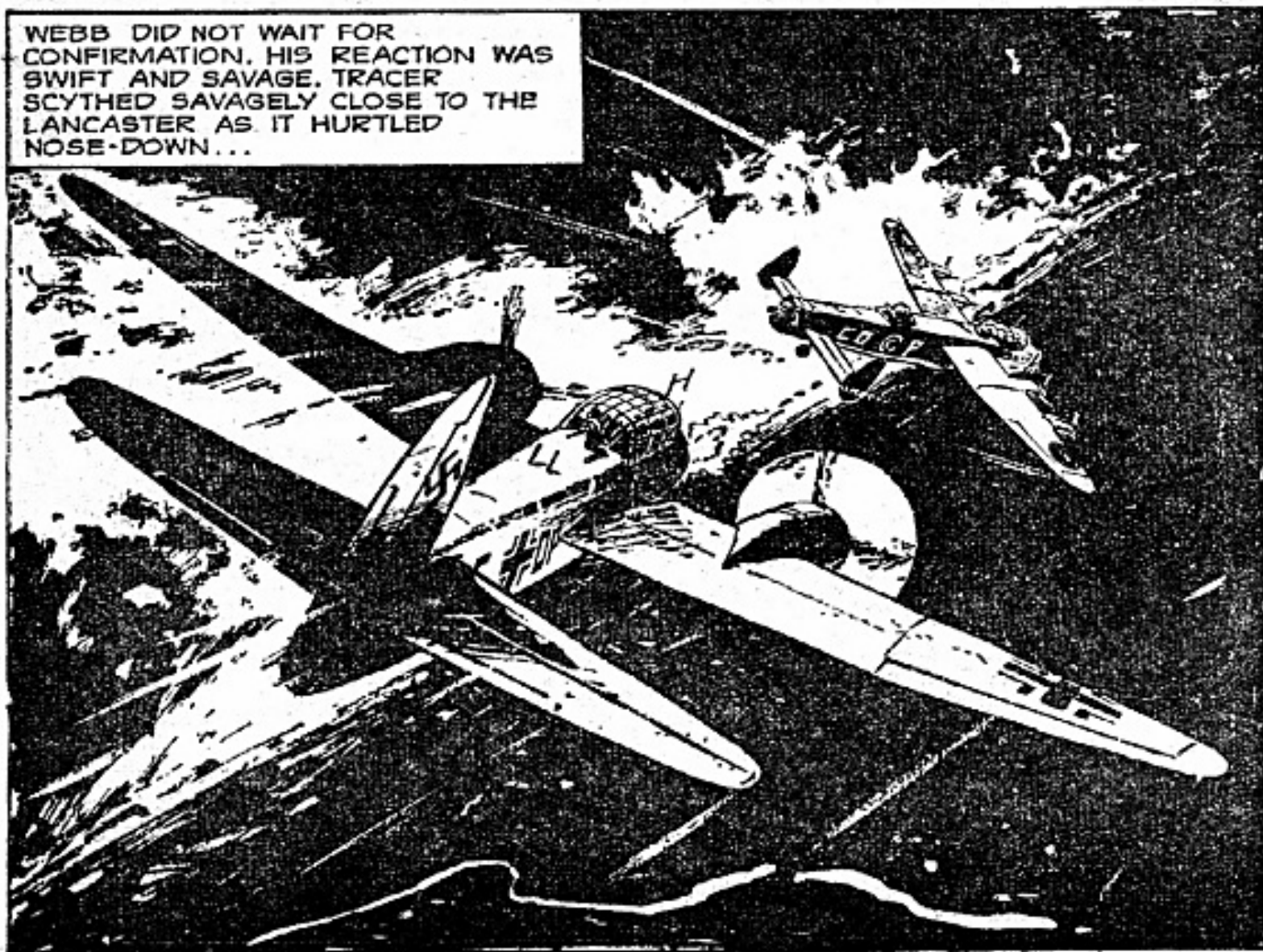




FIERCELY, WEBB'S EYES PROBED THE STARRY BACKDROP OF THE NIGHT. SUDDENLY, HE SAW THE FLOATING BLACK SHAPE ABOVE HIM—JUST AS PAUL VIBART SHOUTED A WARNING...



WEBB DID NOT WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION. HIS REACTION WAS SWIFT AND SAVAGE. TRACER SCYTHED SAVAGELY CLOSE TO THE LANCASTER AS IT HURTTLED NOSE-DOWN...



IT WAS A CLOSE THING. P FOR POPSIE SHOT AT FULL THROTTLE ACROSS THE FLARING LIGHTS OF THE RUNWAY...

TELL CONTROL THERE'S A JERRY INTRUDER WAITING TO AMBUSH OUR KITES AS THEY COME IN!

OKAY, SKIPPER!

P FOR POPSIE'S WARNING SOON ALERTED THE AIRFIELD DEFENCES. BUT THE JUNKERS DID NOT STAY LONG TO SEE THEM IN ACTION...





## The Black Ace

AT LAST, WEBB BROUGHT THE LANCASTER DOWN SAFELY. HIS VOICE WAS A LITTLE SHAKY AS HE SPOKE TO PAUL VIBART...

THAT WAS DICEY, PAUL! HOW DID YOU SPOT THAT JUNKER'S SO QUICKLY?

I'VE GOT AN INSTINCT FOR DANGER, SKIPPER!



MIKE SIMPSON HAD FORGOTTEN VIBART'S STRANGE REPLY BY THE TIME THEY REACHED THE CREW ROOM. THE TAIL-GUNNER SAW THEIR NARROW ESCAPE IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT...



YOU SAVED US, DIDN'T YOU, MONTY, LAD? THAT JERRY PILOT HADN'T A HOPE OF SHOOTING DOWN THE LUCKIEST CREW IN BOMBER COMMAND.

VIBART MOVED SWIFTLY. MIKE SIMPSON YELLED AS THE TOY BEAR WAS SNATCHED FROM HIS HAND...

HEY! MY MASCOT!

YOUR PITIFUL SYMBOL OF LUCK! GROW UP, SIMPSON! A TOY BEAR WON'T HELP YOU!

THEY STOOD IN FROZEN ASTONISHMENT AS VIBART JERKED THE LID OFF THE STOVE...

SUPPOSE I BURNED YOUR LUCKY CHARM-DO YOU THINK YOU'D DIE, SIMPSON? IS THAT WHAT YOU BELIEVE? IS IT?

VIBART! DON'T!

BILL WEBB DID NOT WAIT TO FIND OUT IF VIBART WOULD CARRY OUT HIS THREAT. HIS HAND CLAMPED LIKE AN ANGRY VICE ON THE ENGINEER'S WRIST...

ALL RIGHT, VIBART! COOL DOWN! HERE, MIKE - TAKE YOUR MASCOT!

GIVE HIM BACK HIS TOY, THEN, WEBB! BUT IT WON'T PROTECT HIM FROM THE FIRST SHELL THAT'S GOT HIS NAME ON IT!



VIBART'S MOCKING VOICE MOVED THE EASY-GOING ABE NOLAN TO A SUDDEN OUTBURST OF ANGER...



LEAVE HIM ALONE, VIBART! THOSE CARDS YOU CARRY ARE JUST ANOTHER SUPERSTITION ANYWAY! MAYBE THEY CAN TELL US IF WE'RE GOING TO GET THE CHOP TOMORROW NIGHT?



NOLAN'S CHALLENGE WAS HALF-HEARTED, BUT VIBART SEIZED ON IT. THE PACK OF CARDS WAS IN HIS HANDS BEFORE BILL WEBB COULD MOVE...



ALL RIGHT! WE'LL PICK TWO CARDS, AND SEE WHAT THEY TELL US! YOU FIRST, SIMPSON!

BILL WEBB WATCHED SIMPSON TAKE A CARD. THE TAIL-GUNNER HISSED SHARPLY AS HE TURNED ITS FACE TO THE LIGHT...

IT...  
IT'S THE  
ACE OF  
SPADES!

IN MOST CARD GAMES THE ACE OF SPADES IS A USEFUL CARD TO HOLD... IN FORTUNE-TELLING- IT IS THE CARD OF DEATH!

NO ONE MOVED AS VIBART SLOWLY SHUFFLED THE PACK. HE OFFERED THE CARDS TO ABE NOLAN...

NOW YOU,  
NOLAN! YOU  
STARTED  
THIS!



A LANCASTER ZOOMED OVERHEAD AS THE NAVIGATOR SLOWLY PICKED A CARD. THE SOUND ALMOST DROWNED HIS MUFFLED WORDS...

IT'S AN EIGHT...

AN EIGHT! GOOD GRIEF! THAT'S THE SERIAL NUMBER OF OUR KITE! FIRST THE ACE, NOW THIS! WE'RE ALL GOING TO BE KILLED!



THE HARSH VOICE OF BILL WEBB CUT ACROSS MIKE SIMPSON'S HYSTERICAL OUTBURST...

I WANT TO BE IN ON THIS, VIBART. LET ME PICK A CARD!

NO, SKIPPER! YOU'LL SPOIL IT...



BUT WEBB TOOK NO NOTICE, HE RIPPED A CARD FROM THE PACK AND FLUNG IT ON THE TABLE...

IT'S THE JOKER! IN FACT, THE WHOLE THING'S NOTHING BUT A GREAT BIG JOKE! THAT'S RIGHT, ISN'T IT, VIBART?



VIBART MADE NO REPLY...

IT'S EASY TO LAUGH AT VIBART, SKIPPER! BUT WHAT IF HIS CARDS ARE RIGHT?

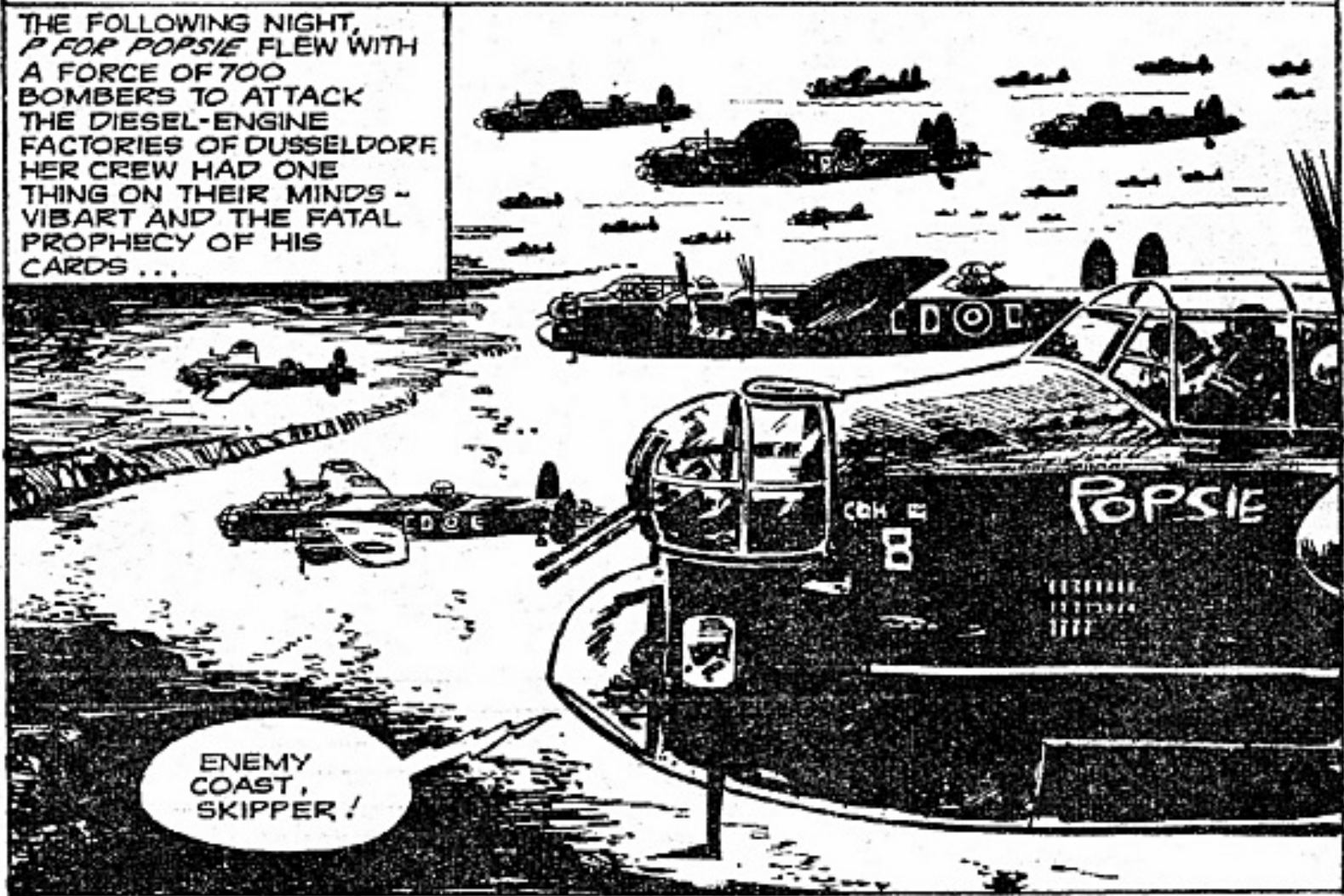


CUT IT OUT, MIKE! REMEMBER- WE'RE THE LUCKIEST CREW IN BOMBER COMMAND!



## Chapter 3. *Figure of Fate*

THE FOLLOWING NIGHT, P FOR POPSY FLEW WITH A FORCE OF 700 BOMBERS TO ATTACK THE DIESEL-ENGINE FACTORIES OF DUSSELDORF. HER CREW HAD ONE THING ON THEIR MINDS - VIBART AND THE FATAL PROPHECY OF HIS CARDS ...



ENEMY  
COAST,  
SKIPPER!

THEY CROSSED THE DUTCH COAST AT 9000 FEET, EACH MAN NURSING HIS UNSPOKEN DOUBT...

FLAK SHIP,  
SKIPPER!

OKAY,  
MIKE! ITS  
GUNNERS ARE  
WAY OFF, AS  
USUAL.

VIBART SAT BEHIND HIS THROTTLES LIKE A TENSE, SILENT SHADOW, UNNERVING A CREW THAT HAD FOUGHT THROUGH SOME OF THE BLOODIEST AIR BATTLES OF THE RUHR...

WHY DOESN'T HE SPEAK? IT'S AS IF HE'S WAITING FOR SOMETHING TO HAPPEN!

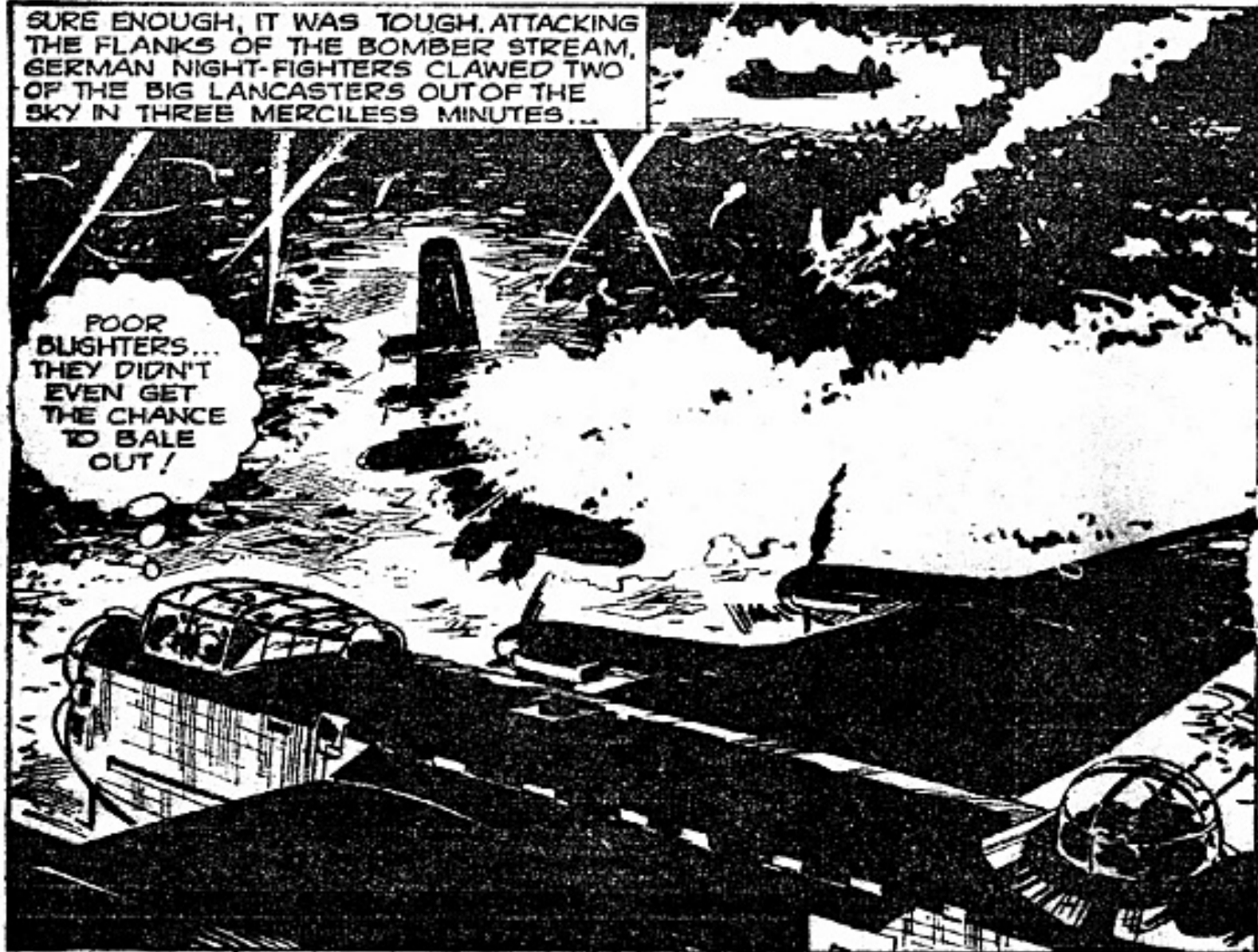
AHEAD OF THEM, THEY SAW THE GREEN TARGET-MARKERS GOING DOWN, IN BETWEEN, FLICKERED THE RED VICIOUS FLASHES THAT THREW A RESTLESS WALL ACROSS THE NIGHT...

BARRAGE FLAK! IT'S GOING TO BE TOUGH GOING!



SURE ENOUGH, IT WAS TOUGH. ATTACKING THE FLANKS OF THE BOMBER STREAM, GERMAN NIGHT-FIGHTERS CLAWED TWO OF THE BIG LANCASTERS OUT OF THE SKY IN THREE MERCILESS MINUTES...

POOR  
BUGHTERS...  
THEY DIDN'T  
EVEN GET  
THE CHANCE  
TO BALE  
OUT!



POPSIE'S ENTIRE CREW  
NOW SENSED THE THREAT  
THAT HUNG OVER THEM.  
THEY ALMOST JUMPED  
WHEN BEN STOTT'S  
VOICE CRACKLED HARSHLY  
ON THE INTERCOM...

NIGHT-  
FIGHTER!  
THREE  
O'CLOCK!  
DIVE TO  
PORT!



THE CREW OF P FOR POPPIE HAD ESCAPED DEATH BY THE SKIN OF THEIR TEETH. THE NEXT LANCASTER WAS NOT SO LUCKY. IT DIVED FRANTICALLY WITH A JUNKERS EIGHTY-EIGHT SITTING ON ITS TAIL...



TRACER FROM THE NIGHTFIGHTER SET FIRE TO ONE OF THE BOMBER'S ENGINES, AND RIPPED INTO HER FUSELAGE...

THE TWO AIRCRAFT VANISHED AS SUDDENLY AS THEY HAD APPEARED. BILL WEBB VOICED THE HELPLESS SHOCK AND FURY THAT ALL OF THEM FELT...



THAT JERRY PILOT WAS JUST WAITING SHOOTING THEM DOWN LIKE SITTING DUCKS!



THEY SUDDENLY FORGOT ABOUT PAUL VIBART'S CARDS, AND THE OMINOUS FIGURE EIGHT ON P FOR POPSIE'S FUSELAGE, AS WEBB BEGAN HIS STRAIGHT, FIFTEEN MILE RUN-UP TO THE TARGET...

OPENING BOMB-DOORS NOW, JOHNNO! LET'S GET EVEN WITH THE JERRIES FOR THE BOYS IN THAT LANCASTER!



THE CREW WORKED WITH THEIR USUAL SMOOTH EFFICIENCY. WEBB JUDGED HEIGHT AND SPEED PERFECTLY. JOHNNO MARTIN DROPPED HIS BOMBS PLUMB ON THE TARGET-MARKERS...



BELOW THEM, THE GERMAN FACTORY DISSOLVED IN A VICIOUS WELTER OF FLAME AND STEEL...

THEY REACHED THE TURNING-POINT WITHOUT SEEING ANY MORE FIGHTERS. AS HE SET COURSE FOR HOME, WEBB SUDDENLY THOUGHT ABOUT PAUL VIBART...



THIS WAS THE NIGHT WE WERE SUPPOSED TO GET THE CHOP, LADS!

WE'LL NEVER GET THE CHOP, SKIPPER! WE'RE JUST DEAD LUCKY, THAT'S ALL!

THREE HOURS LATER, P FOR POPPSIE HAD COMPLETED HER FIFTY-NINTH OPERATION. AS HER CREW STOOD WAITING IN THE DARKNESS FOR THE FLIGHT TRUCK, BILL WEBB SPOKE QUIETLY TO HIS SILENT ENGINEER...

WELL, PAUL! WE MADE IT AGAIN! WAS IT LUCK - OR WERE YOUR CARDS WRONG?



VIBART SHRUGGED IMPERCEPTIBLY BUT SAID NOTHING...

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, MOST OF P FOR POPPSIE'S CREW ATE A LATE BREAKFAST IN THE MESS...

WELL, WE PRANGED THE TARGET LAST NIGHT, DAVE!

SURE, BILL, BUT OUR LOSSES WERE PRETTY HEAVY - EIGHT KITES SHOT DOWN!





A FORK CLATTERED LOUDLY ON THE TABLE-TOP. IT HAD FALLEN FROM THE TREMBLING HAND OF MIKE SIMPSON...

EIGHT KITES! DON'T YOU SEE? THAT WAS THE NUMBER OF THE CARD WE DREW FROM VIBART'S PACK!



IN THE STUNNED SILENCE THAT FOLLOWED, VIBART'S VOICE SOUNDED QUIET, BUT TRIUMPHANT...

THE CARDS WERE RIGHT, SKIPPER! AND PERHAPS THEY WERE MOCKING US ALL THE TIME! IT WAS YOU WHO PICKED THE JOKER!







BILL WEBB WAS RIGHT ON THE TAIL-GUNNER'S HEELS AS HE BURST INTO PAUL VIBART'S ROOM...



AGAIN, WEBB SAW THE STRANGE, MOCKING TRIUMPH ON VIBART'S FACE AS THE FLIGHT-ENGINEER GATHERED UP HIS CARDS...

WHAT'S THE MATTER, SKIPPER? DON'T SAY THE CARDS HAVE GOT YOU WORRIED?



WEBB WAS WORRIED-NOT BY VIBART'S CARDS, BUT BY THE WAY HIS CREW HAD REACTED TO THEM. HE STRUGGLED HARD TO KEEP THE CONTEMPT FROM HIS VOICE...

ALL RIGHT, VIBART! I RECKON THIS FORTUNE-TELLING LARK IS PHONEY-AND TO PROVE IT, I'LL DRAW TWO CARDS!



QUICKLY, IMPATIENTLY, WEBB DREW THE FIRST CARD. ITS APPEARANCE BROUGHT A SPASM OF FEAR TO SEVERAL FACES IN THE ROOM...

IT'S  
THE ACE  
OF SPADES...  
AGAIN!

THE  
DEATH  
CARD!



WEBB FOUGHT DOWN THE SHOCK HE FELT. HE WHIRLED TOWARDS HIS CREW, CONTEMPT SEETHING OPENLY IN HIS VOICE...

OKAY, I'LL  
DRAW AGAIN!  
IF IT'S AN EIGHT,  
THEN TONIGHT WE GET  
THE CHOP, BECAUSE  
EIGHT'S THE NUMBER OF  
OUR KITE, BUT IT  
WON'T BE AN  
EIGHT!





NO ONE UTTERED A WORD AS WEBB RIPPED ANOTHER CARD FROM THE PACK. HE LOOKED AT IT~ THEN THREW IT DOWN ON VIBART'S BED IN SAVAGE TRIUMPH...

NOW DO YOU BELIEVE ME? IT'S A SEVEN~ AND POPPIE'S NUMBER IS EIGHT. IT CAN'T POSSIBLY MEAN WE'RE GETTING THE CHOP TONIGHT!

DISGUSTEDLY, WEBB MADE FOR THE DOOR. BUT THE FLAT, EMOTIONLESS VOICE OF VIBART HALTED HIM...

YOU'RE WRONG, SKIPPER! THE CARDS DON'T LIE. I'VE JUST SEEN THE FITTERS CHANGING POPPIE'S SERIAL NUMBER~ FROM EIGHT... TO SEVEN!

MR. SIMPSON  
ALMOST PLUNGED  
FROM THE ROOM.  
THE OTHERS FOLLOWED  
HIM BEFORE WEBB  
COULD MOVE. HIS  
FURIOUS ROAR WAS  
UTTERLY IGNORED...

COME  
BACK! HE'S  
LYING!



WEBB KNEW WHERE THEY  
WERE HEADING LONG BEFORE  
HE CAUGHT THEM UP. HIS  
MIND RECOILED FROM THE  
TERRIFYING MEANING OF  
PAUL VIBART'S WORDS...

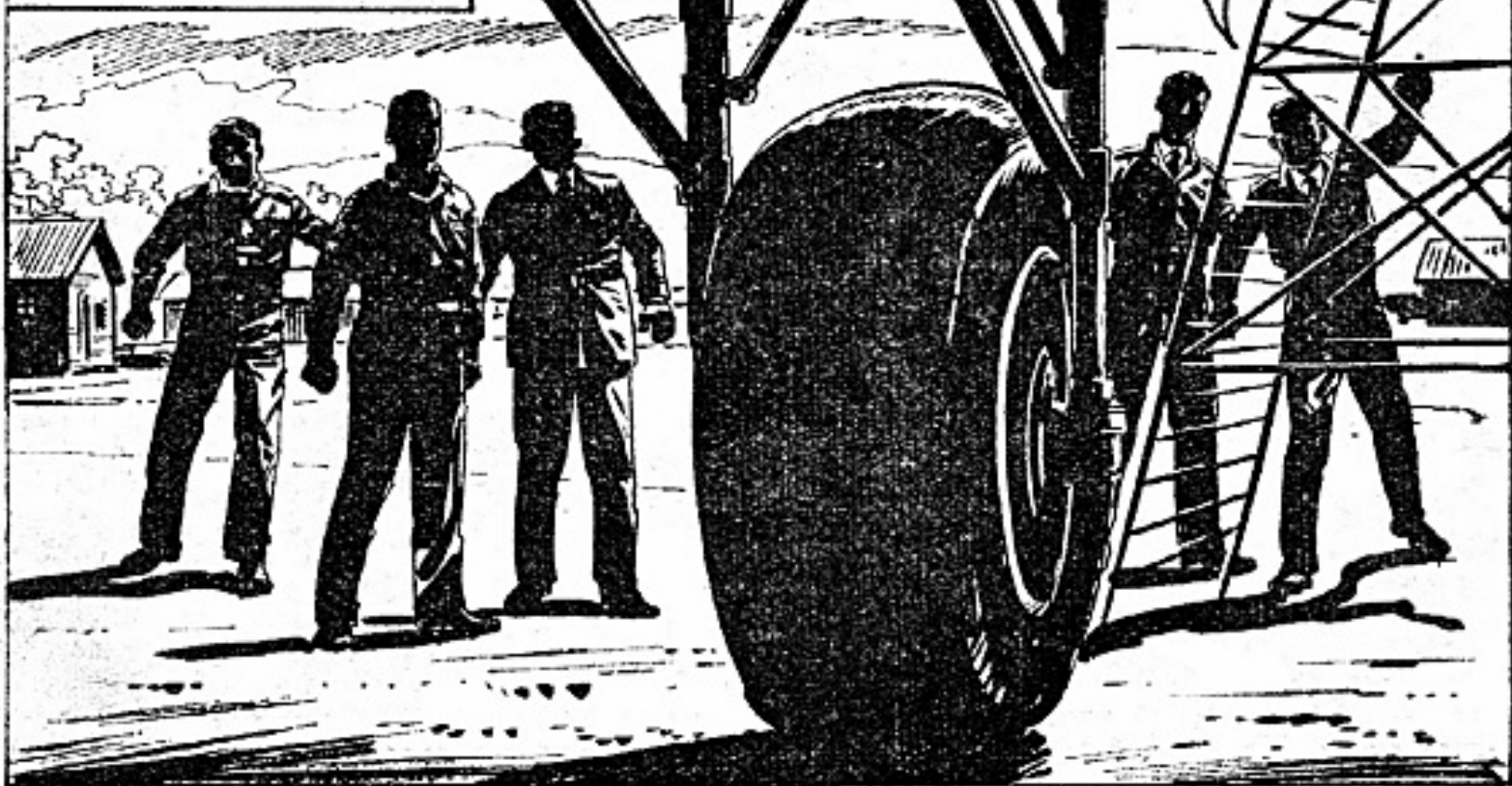
VIBART'S  
LYING! HE'S  
GOT TO  
BE...



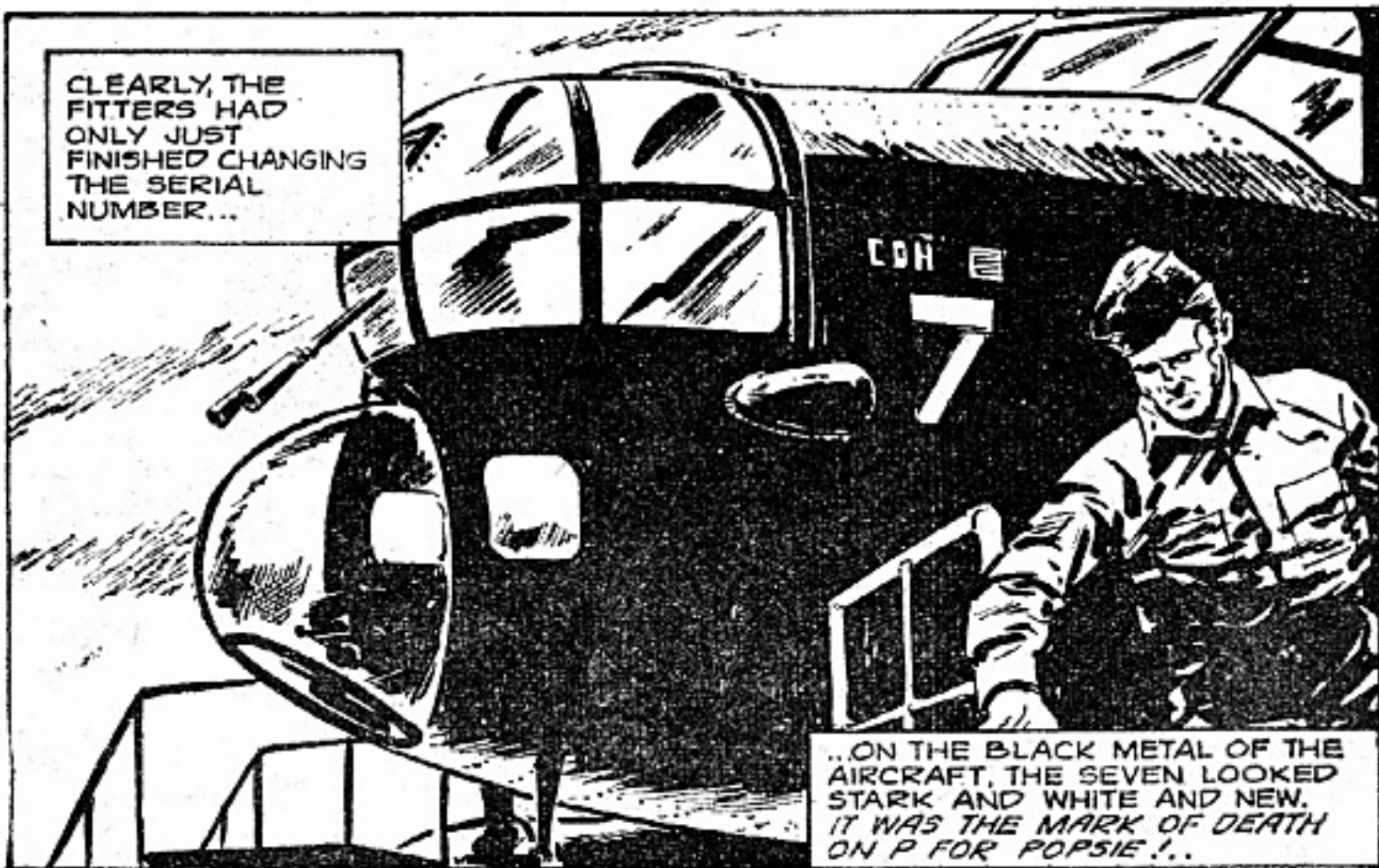


WEBB BURST PAST THE FROZEN FIGURES OF HIS CREW. MIKE SIMPSON'S HUSHED VOICE TOLD HIM ALL HE NEEDED TO KNOW...

VIBART WAS RIGHT, SKIPPER! LOOK!



CLEARLY, THE FITTERS HAD ONLY JUST FINISHED CHANGING THE SERIAL NUMBER...



...ON THE BLACK METAL OF THE AIRCRAFT, THE SEVEN LOOKED STARK AND WHITE AND NEW. IT WAS THE MARK OF DEATH ON P FOR POPSIE!..

TIMELESS SECONDS PASSED BEFORE WEBB FOUND WORDS TO SPEAK. HE ALMOST SNARLED AT THE FLIGHT-SERGEANT FITTER IN CHARGE...

WHAT'S GOING ON, CHIEFY? WHY HAVE YOU CHANGED THE NUMBER?

ORDERS FROM GROUP, SIR! THERE WERE TWO LANC'S WITH THE SAME SERIAL NUMBER! WE WERE TOLD TO CHANGE *POPSIE* THIS MORNING!



IT WAS A MILLION-TO-ONE CHANCE... FOR A YEAR THEY HAD BEEN FLYING AROUND WITH THE WRONG NUMBER. DESPERATELY, WEBB WHIRLED ON HIS CREW...

THIS IS JUST A MANUFACTURER'S MISTAKE, BLOKES! IT DOESN'T MEAN A THING!





BUT, FOR MIKE SIMPSON, IT WAS ONE COINCIDENCE TOO MANY. FOR HIM, A PACK OF CARDS HAD DEALT A HAND WITHOUT HOPE...

NO, SKIPPER! YOU DREW THE CARDS YOURSELF! FIRST THE ACE OF SPADES, THEN THE SEVEN! IT'S OUR TURN TONIGHT!

STOP IT, MIKE! PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER!

WEBB WALKED AWAY FROM THE WHITE-FACED TAIL-GUNNER. HE FOUND HIS EYES RIVETED ON THE STARK, WHITE SEVEN ON P FOR POPSIE'S NOSE...

IT'S CRAZY! I WISH I'D NEVER SET EYES ON VIBART AND HIS CARDS! BUT MAYBE WE WON'T BE ON OPS TONIGHT...

## Chapter 4. *Error of Judgment*

THERE WAS OPERATIONAL FLYING IN STORE FOR P FOR POPPIE THAT NIGHT. THE TARGET WAS A HUGE ENGINEERING WORKS AT DORTMUND, VITAL TO THE GERMAN WAR EFFORT. THE MASSED AIRCREWS WERE BRIEFED BY THE SQUADRON COMMANDER...

THERE ARE HEAVY FLAK BATTERIES ALONG THE ROUTE, BUT YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO AVOID THEM WITH GOOD NAVIGATION...



THE WAITING BETWEEN BRIEFING AND TAKE-OFF WAS NEVER PLEASANT. FOR BILL WEBB'S CREW THAT NIGHT, IT WAS MORE LIKE TORTURE...

THEY'VE FACED DEATH A HUNDRED TIMES, AND JOKED ABOUT IT! BUT NOW THEY'VE GOT THE JITTERS OVER A PACK OF CARDS!





TWO CARDS, PICKED AT RANDOM, HAD CHANGED A TOUGH, VETERAN CREW INTO A TEAM OF NERVOUS, WORRIED MEN. EVEN THE EYES OF ABE NOLAN HELD A RESTLESS SHADOW OF DOUBT...

SURELY THIS HASN'T RATTLED YOU, ABE?

I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY, SKIPPER! IT JUST SEEMS A FANTASTIC COINCIDENCE. MAYBE THERE IS SOMETHING IN IT...



WEBB'S FIRST CHANCE TO SPEAK TO VIBART CAME AS THEY WERE CHANGING IN THE CREW-ROOM...

JUST IN CASE ANYTHING HAPPENS TONIGHT, VIBART, I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT I DON'T BELIEVE A WORD OF THIS FORTUNE-TELLING TRIPE!

HAVE IT YOUR OWN WAY, SKIPPER, BUT WE'LL KNOW FOR SURE IN SIX HOURS' TIME!



AT 8 P.M., THE AIRCREWS WALKED OUT TO THE WAITING FLIGHT TRUCKS. P FOR POPPIE'S CREW WAS NORMALLY A TALKATIVE, HAPPY BUNCH, BUT THIS NIGHT THEY WALKED IN A KNOT OF TIGHT-LIPPED SILENCE...

IF ONLY SOMETHING WOULD GO WRONG WITH OUR KITE, SO THAT WE'D HAVE TO TAKE THE SPARE / ANYTHING TO GET AWAY FROM THAT CONFOUNDED SEVEN!



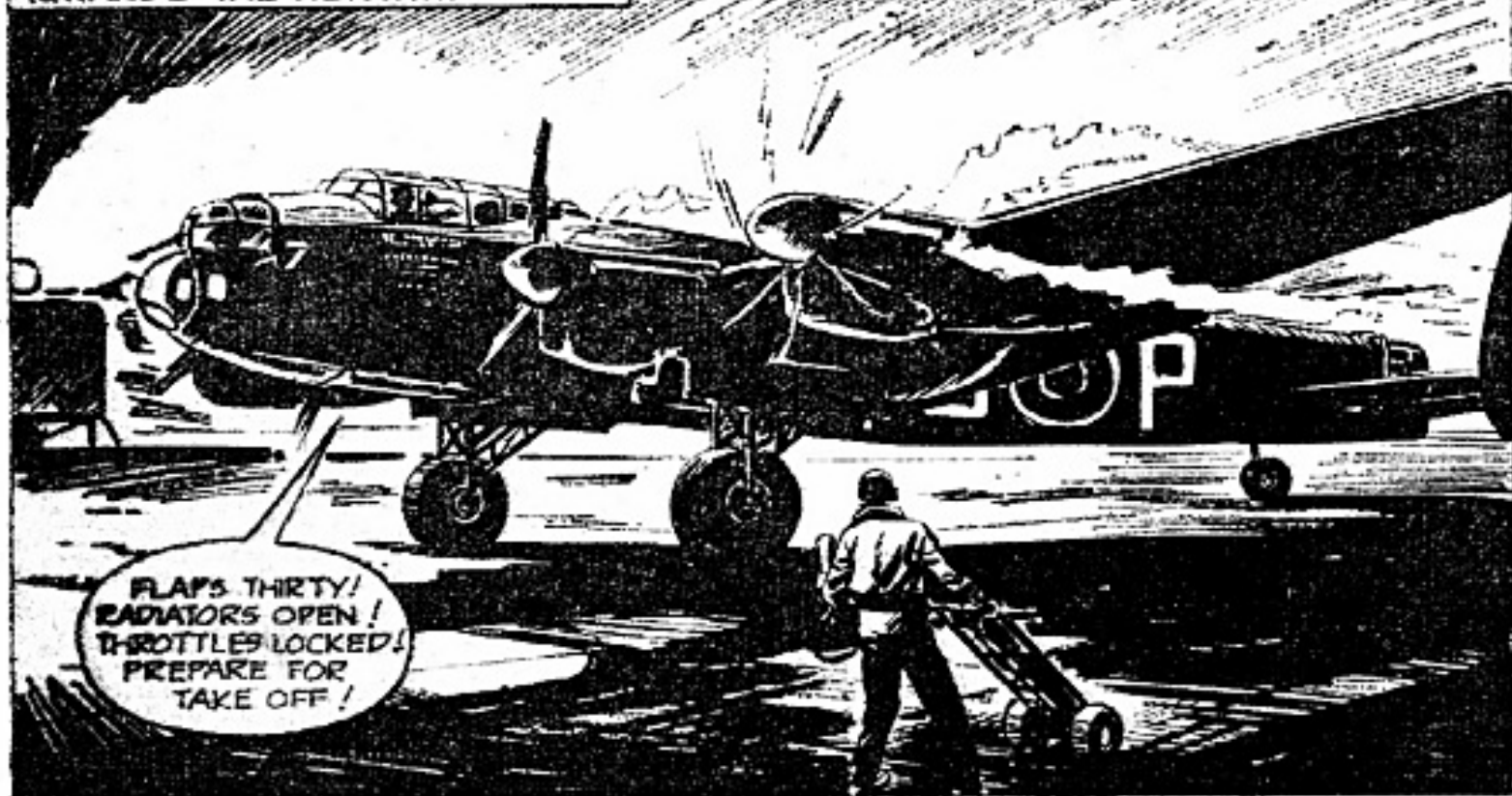
BUT THERE WAS NOTHING WRONG WITH P FOR POPPIE. WEBB SIGNED FOR A MACHINE IN PERFECT CONDITION. AT LAST, HE SETTLED DOWN BEHIND THE CONTROLS...

ALL RIGHT, VIBART! LET'S GET THIS KITE IN THE AIR!



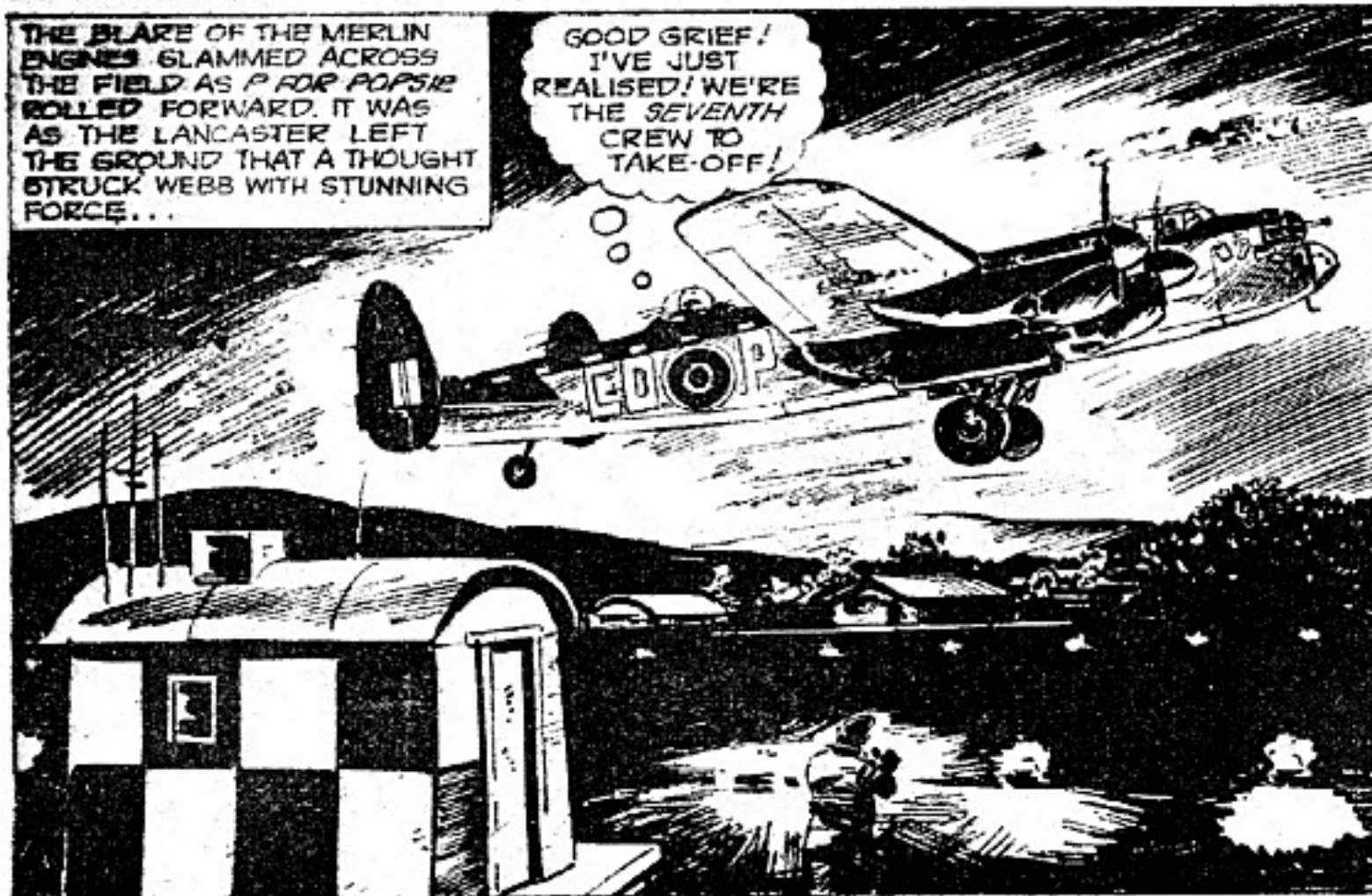


WEBB PUNCHED THE BUTTONS OF THE BOOSTER COILS. THE ENGINES WHINED AND SPUN EXPLOSIVELY. P FOR POPPIE WADDLED FORWARD AND SWUNG HER NOSE TOWARDS THE NORTH...



THE BLARE OF THE MERLIN ENGINES GLAMMED ACROSS THE FIELD AS P FOR POPPIE ROLLED FORWARD. IT WAS AS THE LANCASTER LEFT THE GROUND THAT A THOUGHT STRUCK WEBB WITH STUNNING FORCE...

GOOD GRIEF! I'VE JUST REALISED! WE'RE THE SEVENTH CREW TO TAKE-OFF!

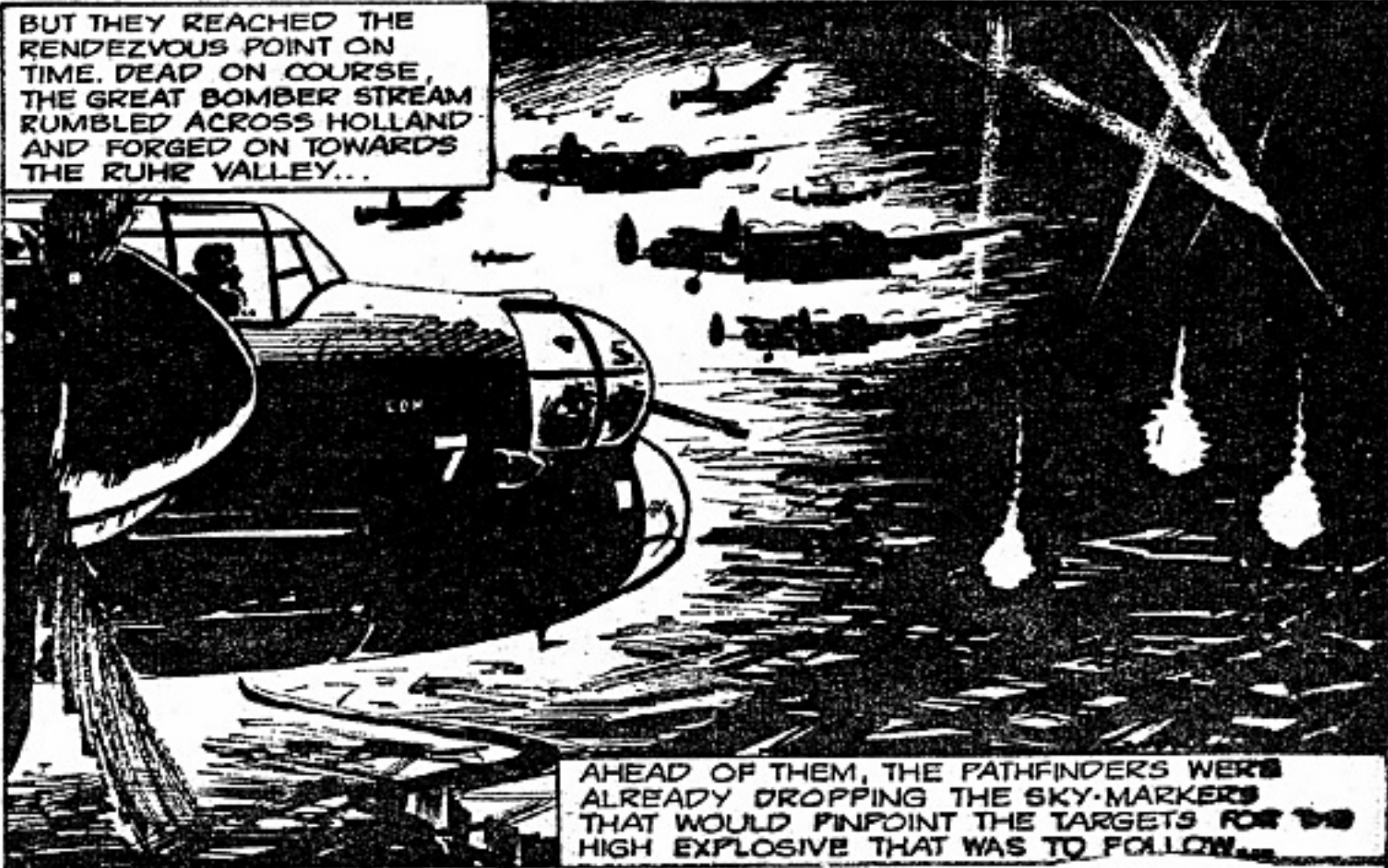


THE SUN WAS LOW BEHIND THEM AS THEY TURNED SLOWLY ON COURSE - SEVEN MEN WHO SAT IN THE COLD SHADOW OF A PROPHECY... AND ONE WHO STRUGGLED TO REJECT IT WITH EVERY FIBRE OF HIS BODY...



LET'S HOPE NOTHING GOES WRONG BEFORE WE REACH THE TARGET! THE REST OF THE BLOKES WILL RECKON IT'S SOME KIND OF OMEN!

BUT THEY REACHED THE RENDEZVOUS POINT ON TIME. DEAD ON COURSE, THE GREAT BOMBER STREAM RUMBLED ACROSS HOLLAND AND FORGED ON TOWARDS THE RUHR VALLEY...



AHEAD OF THEM, THE PATHFINDERS WERE ALREADY DROPPING THE SKY-MARKERS THAT WOULD PINPOINT THE TARGETS FOR THE HIGH EXPLOSIVE THAT WAS TO FOLLOW.



WEBB WAS STILL THINKING OF P FOR POPPIE'S CHANGE OF NUMBER AS THEY CROSSED THE RHINE. IT WAS THEN THAT A CRAZY, VICIOUS CLATTER CAME FROM THE STARBOARD OUTER ENGINE...

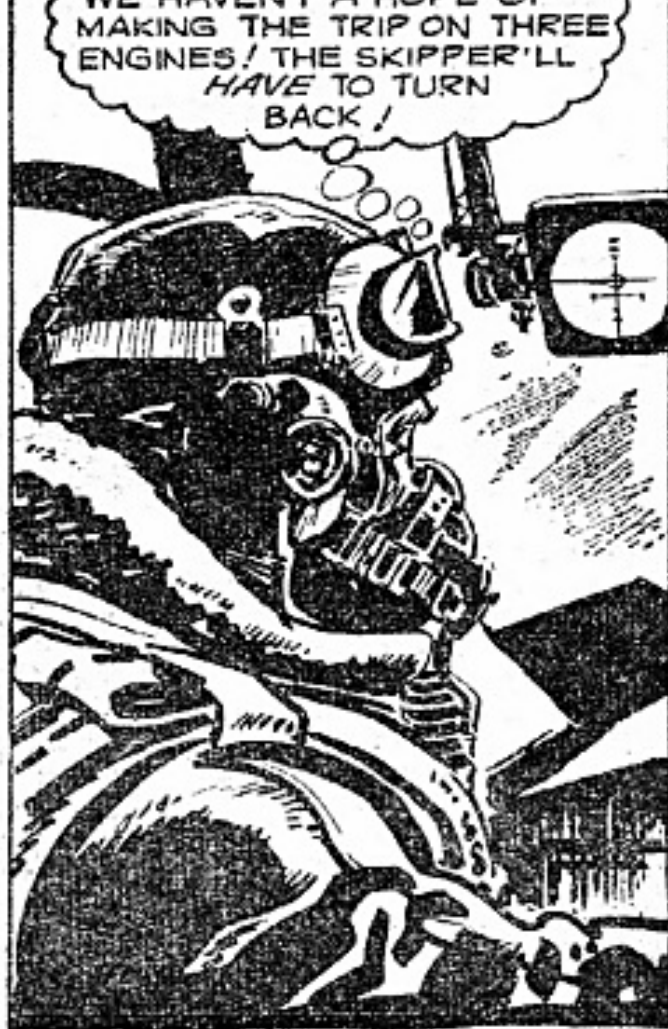
RUNAWAY AIRSCREW!  
FEATHER IT,  
VIBART! QUICK,  
MAN!

HESITATION ON VIBART'S PART COULD HAVE BEEN FATAL. BUT THE ENGINEER WAS QUICK TO PRESS THE STOP-BUTTON OF THE STARBOARD-OUTER. THE GREAT, SLASHING BLADES FROZE ABRUPTLY...

IN THE TAIL-TURRET, MIKE SIMPSON WAS THINKING ABOUT PAUL VIBART'S CARDS...

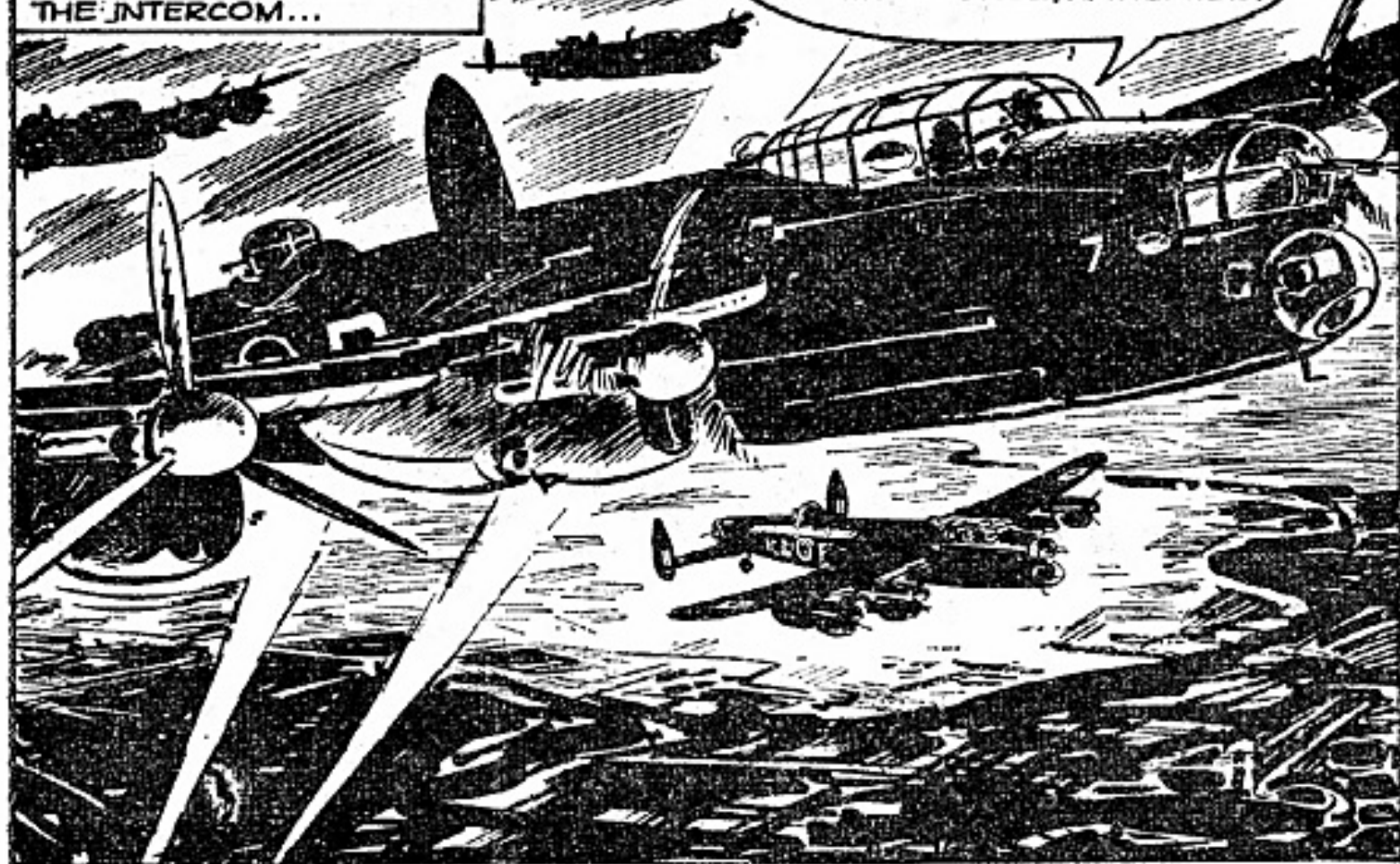
WE HAVEN'T A HOPE OF  
MAKING THE TRIP ON THREE  
ENGINES! THE SKIPPER'LL  
HAVE TO TURN  
BACK!

PHEW!  
THAT WAS  
CLOSE!



WEBB KNEW WHAT THEY WERE THINKING-THAT THEY WANTED HIM TO TURN BACK. ALMOST MERCILESSLY, HE SHATTERED THE TAUT, EXPECTANT SILENCE OF THE INTERCOM...

CAPTAIN TO CREW! I'M GOING ON TO THE TARGET! IF WE TURN BACK NOW, IT'LL ENDANGER THE OTHER AIRCRAFT IN THE STREAM! CONFIRM MY COURSE, NAVIGATOR!



WEBB COULD ALMOST FEEL THE SILENT RESENTMENT THAT FOLLOWED HIS WORDS. THIRTY SECONDS LATER, HE HEARD THE HARSH, UNSTEADY VOICE OF ABE NOLAN...

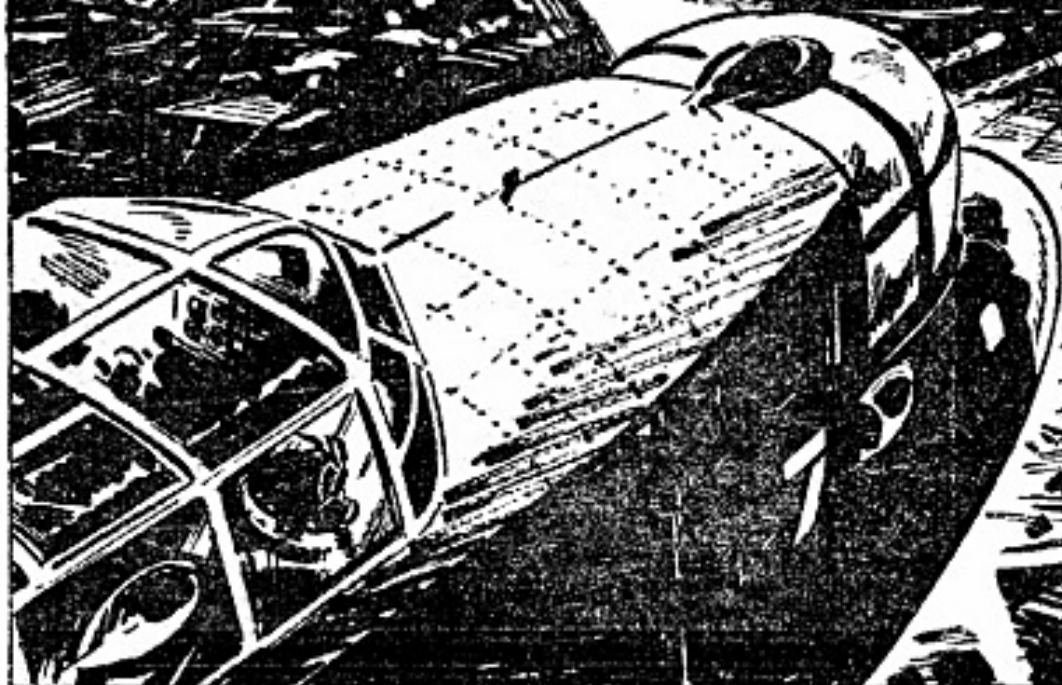
NEW COURSE, SKIPPER! ONE-ONE-O MAGNETIC!





THREE MINUTES LATER, THEY LOST CONTACT WITH THE MAIN BOMBER STREAM. WITH ONLY THREE ENGINES RUNNING, WEBB HAD EXPECTED THIS, BUT HE WAS NOT PREPARED FOR THE SUDDEN YELL THAT CAME FROM JOHNNO MARTIN...

HEAVY  
FLAK, SKIPPER!  
IT-IT'S ALL  
AROUND US!



THE LANCASTER ROCKED SAVAGELY AS A HUNDRED UNSEEN GUNS BELCHES STEEL FROM THE LIVID WELL OF THE NIGHT. WEBB BELLOWED HARSHLY ON THE INTERCOM...



ABE NOLAN WAS ONE OF THE FINEST NAVIGATORS IN BOMBER COMMAND... BUT TONIGHT HE WAS THINKING OF THE FIGURE SEVEN-AND THE BLACK ACE OF SPADES...



Chapter 5. *Unlucky for Some*

THAT WAS HOW P FOR POPPIE BLUNDERED INTO THE HEAVIEST CONCENTRATION OF DEATH IN THE RUHR.

WE HAVEN'T A CHANCE, SKIPPER! YOU'VE GOT TO TURN BACK!

GET BACK TO YOUR SET, SPENCE!

STOP

POPSIE

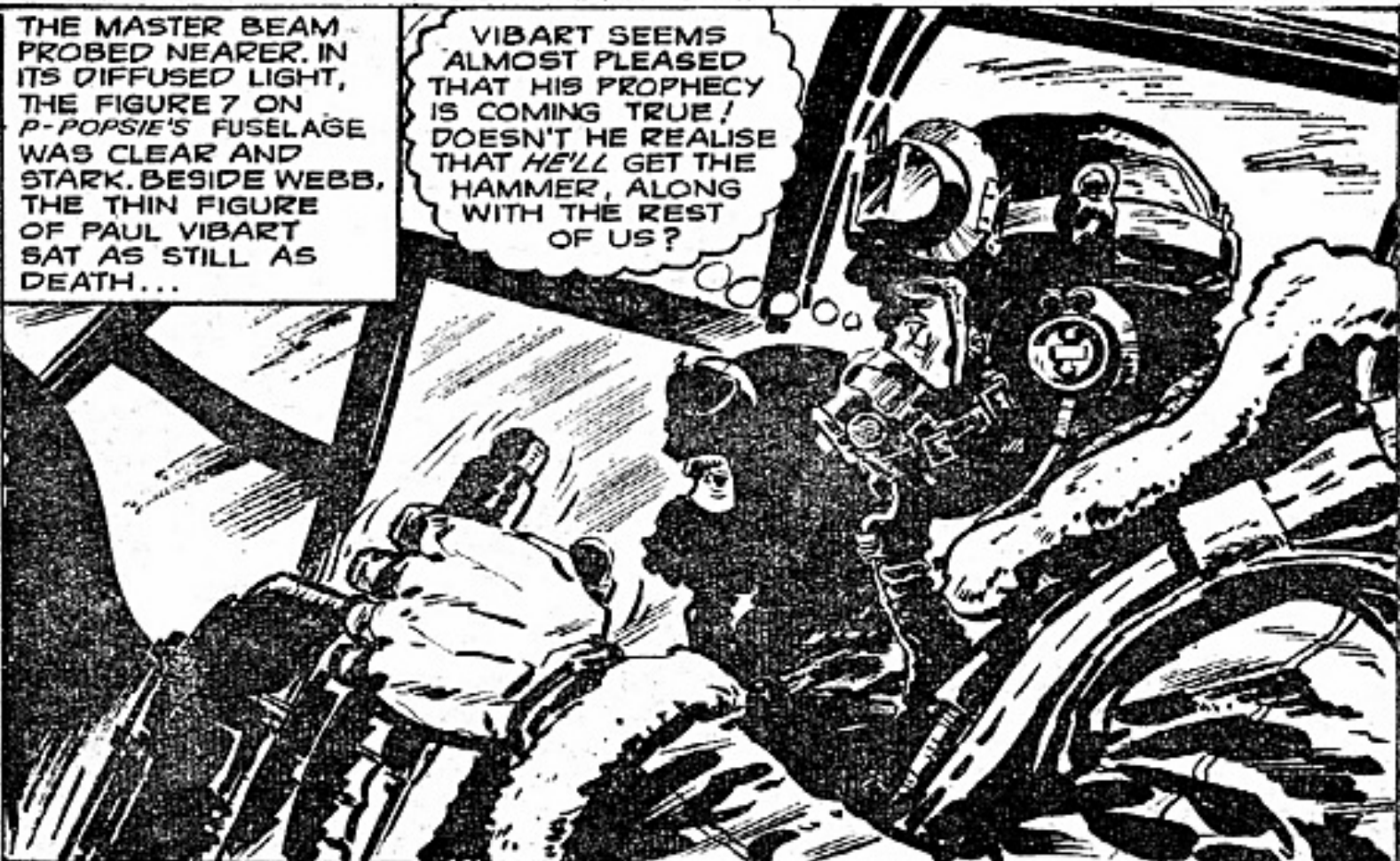
WEBB ALMOST SCREECHED THE WORDS AS HE THREW THE LANCASTER THROUGH THE FLICKERING MAELSTROM. IN THE BOMB-AIMER'S DOME, JOHNNO MARTIN WAS WATCHING THE BROAD, BLUE COLUMN OF THE MASTER BEAM STALK ACROSS THE SKY...

IF THAT THING LATCHES ON TO US-WE'VE HAD IT!



THE MASTER BEAM PROBED NEARER. IN ITS DIFFUSED LIGHT, THE FIGURE 7 ON P-POPSIE'S FUSELAGE WAS CLEAR AND STARK. BESIDE WEBB, THE THIN FIGURE OF PAUL VIBART SAT AS STILL AS DEATH...

VIBART SEEMS ALMOST PLEASED THAT HIS PROPHECY IS COMING TRUE! DOESN'T HE REALISE THAT HE'LL GET THE HAMMER, ALONG WITH THE REST OF US?



DAZEDLY, WEBB SHOOK HIS HEAD. NO, THE CARDS COULD NOT BE RIGHT. THE WHOLE THING WAS FANTASTIC. IT WAS THE GHASTLY, BLuish GLARE THAT SUDDENLY FLOODED THE WHOLE COCKPIT THAT WRENCHED HIM BACK TO REALITY...

THE MASTER BEAM! IT'S GOT US! DIVE, SKIPPER, DIVE!



WEBB KNEW WHAT HE HAD TO DO. HE WAS PUSHING HARD ON THE STICK WHEN A STREAM OF YELLOW TRACER PUNCHED UP INTO THE LANCASTER'S PORT-INNER ENGINE...

A HIT!  
WE'RE  
HIT!

THEY SAT THERE, STARING AT THE STILL PROPELLER, WAITING FOR THE FATAL EXPLOSION OF IGNITED FUEL. THEY WERE STILL WAITING WHEN ALBERT SPENCE GASPED HOARSELY...

THE  
FUEL-TANK!  
IT-IT DIDN'T  
CATCH  
FIRE!



IT TOOK WEBB THREE SECONDS TO REALISE WHAT HAD HAPPENED. THE RELIEF MADE HIM NEARLY HYSTERICAL...



OF COURSE THE TANK DIDN'T GO UP! IT WAS EMPTY! VIBART MUST HAVE FORGOTTEN TO SWITCH TO THE RESERVE!

WEBB WENT ON QUICKLY, HIS VOICE RINGING WITH TRIUMPH...

DID YOU GET THAT, BOYS? WE WERE LUCKY! EVEN VIBART'S CARDS CAN'T KNOCK US DOWN! FIRST WE'RE GOING TO FIX ONE OF THESE SEARCHLIGHTS!



WEBB PUSHED ON THE CONTROL COLUMN WITH ALL HIS STRENGTH. P FOR POPPIE HURTLED DOWN THROUGH THE BLINDING GLARE AND FLAK, TO ONE THOUSAND FEET...



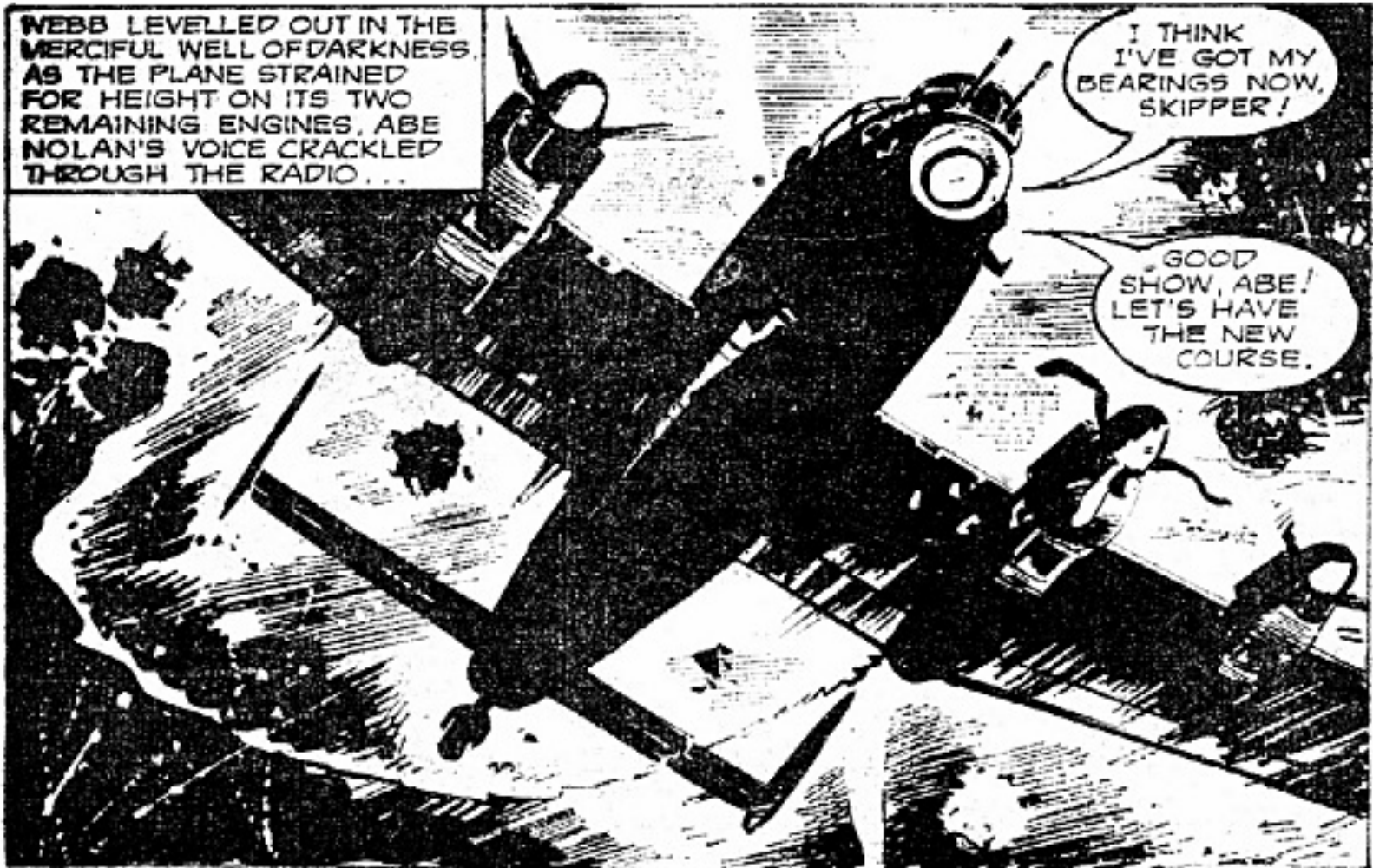
NOW, BEN! GIVE THAT SEARCHLIGHT A SQUIRT!

FAIR ENOUGH, SKIPPER!

IN TEN SECONDS, BEN STOTT'S BROWNING GUNS POURED A DEVASTATING BURST AT THE ROOT OF THE BEAM AND SMASHED THE SEARCHLIGHT INTO SCRAP...



WEBB LEVELLED OUT IN THE MERCIFUL WELL OF DARKNESS. AS THE PLANE STRAINED FOR HEIGHT ON ITS TWO REMAINING ENGINES, ABE NOLAN'S VOICE CRACKLED THROUGH THE RADIO...



I THINK I'VE GOT MY BEARINGS NOW, SKIPPER!

GOOD SHOW, ABE! LET'S HAVE THE NEW COURSE.



TEN MINUTES LATER, THEY FOUND THE TARGET. PAUL VISART WAS FORGOTTEN AS THEY BEGAN THE RUN-UP. ONCE AGAIN, THEY WERE THE LUCKIEST CREW IN BOMBER COMMAND...

LEFT...STEADY,  
STEADY! BOMBS  
GONE!

THEY SAW THE SLOW, RED ERUPTIONS AS THE BOMBS WENT HOME. THEN THE FIRE AND THE TUMULT WERE BEHIND THEM, AND WEBB COULD HEAR THE JUBILANT VOICES OF HIS CREW...

NICE  
WORK,  
JOHNNO!

TAKE  
US HOME,  
SKIPPER!

DEAD ON  
TARGET!

DARKNESS MASKED THE WHITE SEVEN ON P-POPSIE'S FUSELAGE AS WEBB STEERED A DOG-LEG COURSE FOR HOME. AS THE DUTCH COAST CAME UP, HE SPOKE QUIETLY TO PAUL VIBART...

LOOKS AS IF WE'RE GOING TO MAKE IT, PAUL! PERHAPS THE CARDS WERE WRONG!

VIBART HAD NO TIME TO ANSWER. THEY WERE OVER THE NORTH SEA WHEN THE PORT-OUTER ENGINE COUGHED, FALTERED, THEN DIED...

PORT-OUTER ENGINE'S PACKED UP! FLAK MUST HAVE HOLED THE FUEL TANKS!

WEBB KNEW THERE WAS NO CHANCE OF REACHING THE ENGLISH COAST ON ONE ENGINE. THE LANCASTER COULD STILL FLY FOR SOME TIME, BUT WITH A GRADUAL LOSS OF HEIGHT...

WE'LL HAVE TO DITCH! CALL UP AIR-SEA RESCUE-GIVE THEM OUR POSITION!

RIGHT, SKIPPER!



WEBB TOOK THE LANCASTER DOWN TO ONE THOUSAND FEET. BESIDE HIM, PAUL VIBART WAS SILENT...

WE'RE IN LUCK, SKIPPER!  
A COUPLE OF RESCUE SHIPS  
ARE PATROLLING  
TEN MILES DEAD  
AHEAD!

GOOD! KEEP  
TRANSMITTING  
OUR POSITION  
AS LONG AS  
YOU CAN!

WITH HER SINGLE, BOOMING ENGINE, *P-POPSIE* BATTLED ON TOWARDS THE DAWN. FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, WEBB KNEW THAT SHE COULD NOT GO MUCH FARTHER...

DINGHY! DINGHY!  
PREPARE FOR  
DITCHING!

THE CREW TOOK UP THEIR CRASH POSITIONS, AND PUT THEIR FAITH IN THEIR SKIPPER...



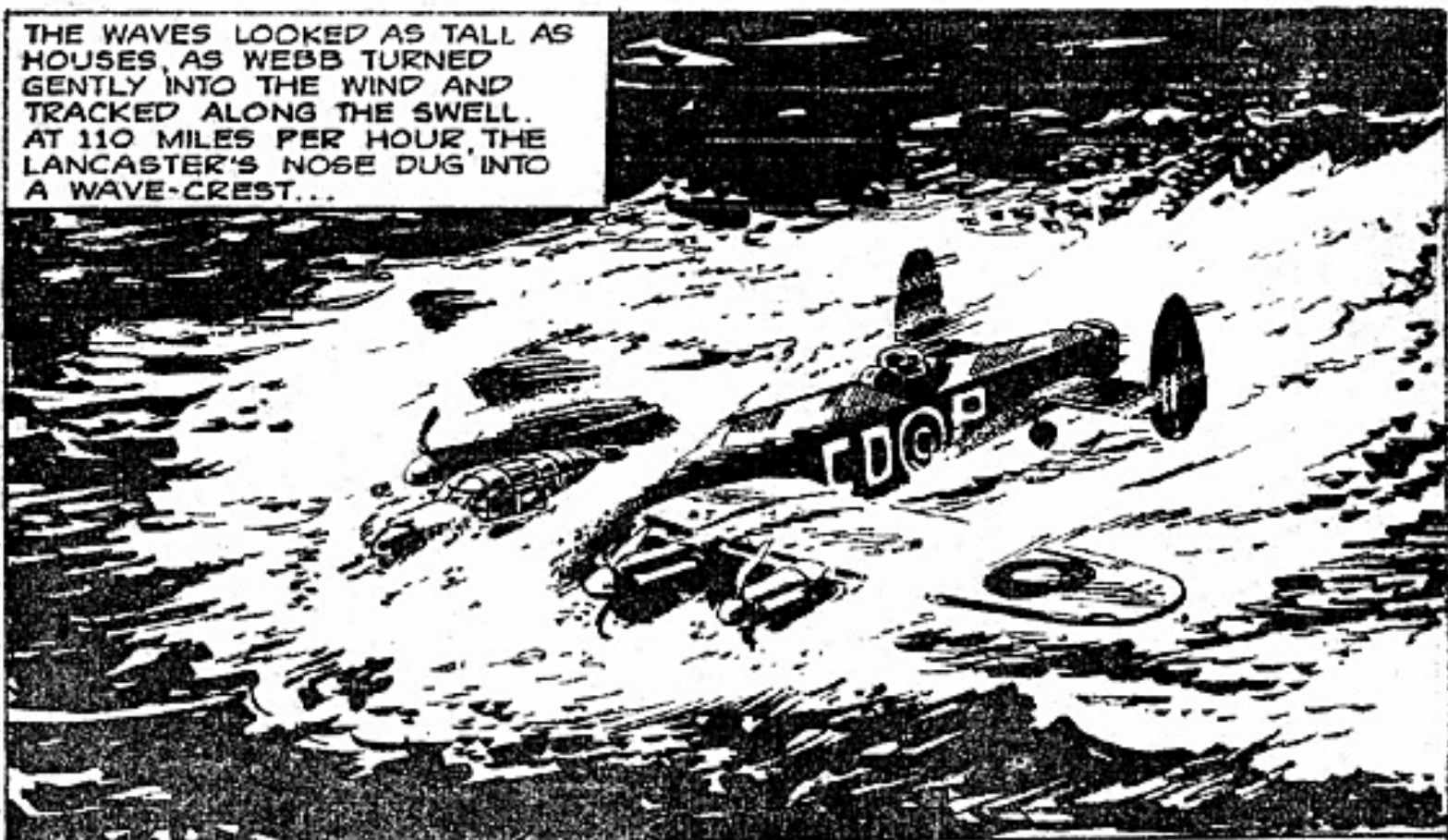
THEY THOUGHT OF THE WHITE FIGURE SEVEN ON *P-POPSIE*'S NOSE - AND WONDERED IF, AT LAST, THEIR LUCK HAD RUN OUT...

SLOWLY, WEBB LET THE LANCASTER DOWN. AT TWO HUNDRED FEET, HE SAW THE SEA...

IT'S  
ROUGH!  
JUST OUR  
LUCK!



THE WAVES LOOKED AS TALL AS HOUSES, AS WEBB TURNED GENTLY INTO THE WIND AND TRACKED ALONG THE SWELL. AT 110 MILES PER HOUR, THE LANCASTER'S NOSE DUG INTO A WAVE-CREST...



THEN THE WHOLE AIRCRAFT SMACKED DOWN, BOUNCING FROM WAVE-TOP TO WAVE-TOP TO A VIOLENT HALT. P POPSIE WAS DOWN!



THE CREW RUSHED OUT OF THE HATCHES AND STRUGGLED TO THE STARBOARD MAINPLANE. ABE NOLAN HAD THE DINGHY READY, STRUGGLING TO INFLATE IT IN THE TOWERING SEA...

TAKE YOUR TIME, ABE! *POPSIE* WON'T GO DOWN YET! SHE'S RIDING THE SEA PRETTY WELL!

IT WAS A GOOD LANDING, SKIPPER!



NOLAN SOON GOT THE DINGHY INFLATED. SOMEHOW, IT BROKE FROM HIS GRASP. IN THREE SWIFT SECONDS, THE WAVES HAD SNATCHED IT BEYOND THEIR REACH...

THE DINGHY!  
I'VE GOT TO GET IT!

NO, ABE!  
YOU WOULDN'T HAVE A CHANCE!  
WITH LUCK, THE RESCUE SHIPS SHOULD BE HERE SOON...

IT WAS THEN THAT VIBART SPOKE IN COLD, CONTEMPTUOUS FURY...

YOUR PRECIOUS LUCK WON'T GET YOU OUT OF THIS, WEBB! I'M GOING AFTER THAT DINGHY!

VIBART!  
DON'T BE A FOOL!



VIBART DIVED BEFORE ANYONE COULD STOP HIM. HE STRUCK AWAY FROM THE WALLING HULK OF P-POPSIE, AWAY FROM THE SIX MEN CLINGING DESPERATELY TO THEIR LUCK...



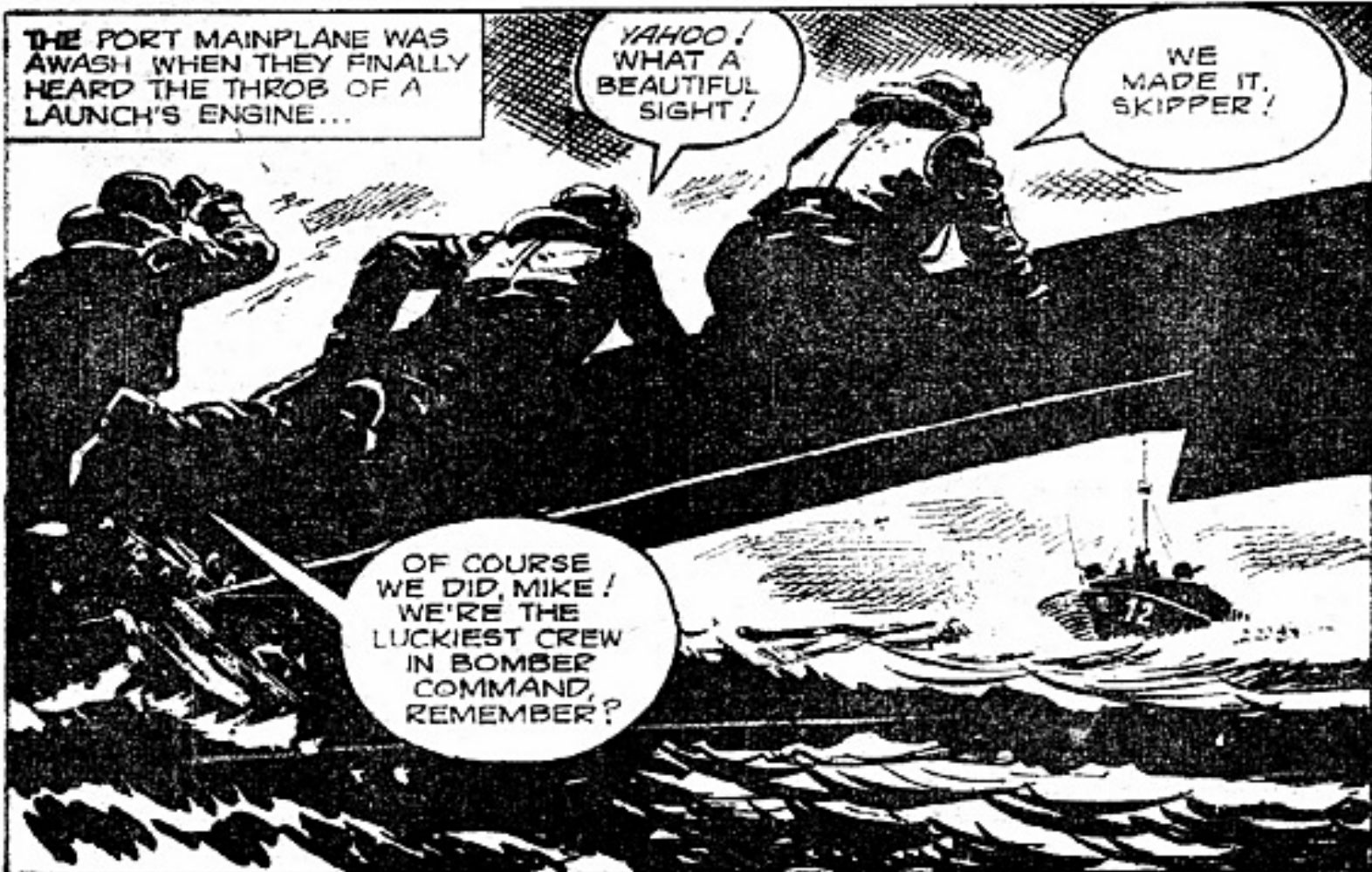
PERHAPS IT WAS FEAR THAT GAVE HIM STRENGTH...PERHAPS IT WAS A FANATICAL REFUSAL TO BELIEVE HIS CARDS COULD BE WRONG...

WHEN THEY LAST SAW VIBART, HE WAS STILL STRIKING OUT STRONGLY IN THE DIRECTION OF THE DINGHY...AND THE LANCASTER WAS SETTLING FAST INTO THE WATER...



CUT IT OUT, MIKE!

THE PORT MAINPLANE WAS AWASH WHEN THEY FINALLY HEARD THE THROB OF A LAUNCH'S ENGINE...



YAHOO!  
WHAT A  
BEAUTIFUL  
SIGHT!

WE  
MADE IT,  
SKIPPER!

OF COURSE  
WE DID, MIKE!  
WE'RE THE  
LUCKIEST CREW  
IN BOMBER  
COMMAND,  
REMEMBER?

THE LAUNCH CLOSED ALONGSIDE, AND THE GRINNING CREW PULLED THEM ABOARD...

ONE OF MY CREW IS STILL IN THE WATER, SKIPPER! HE WENT AFTER OUR DINGHY WHEN IT BROKE AWAY!

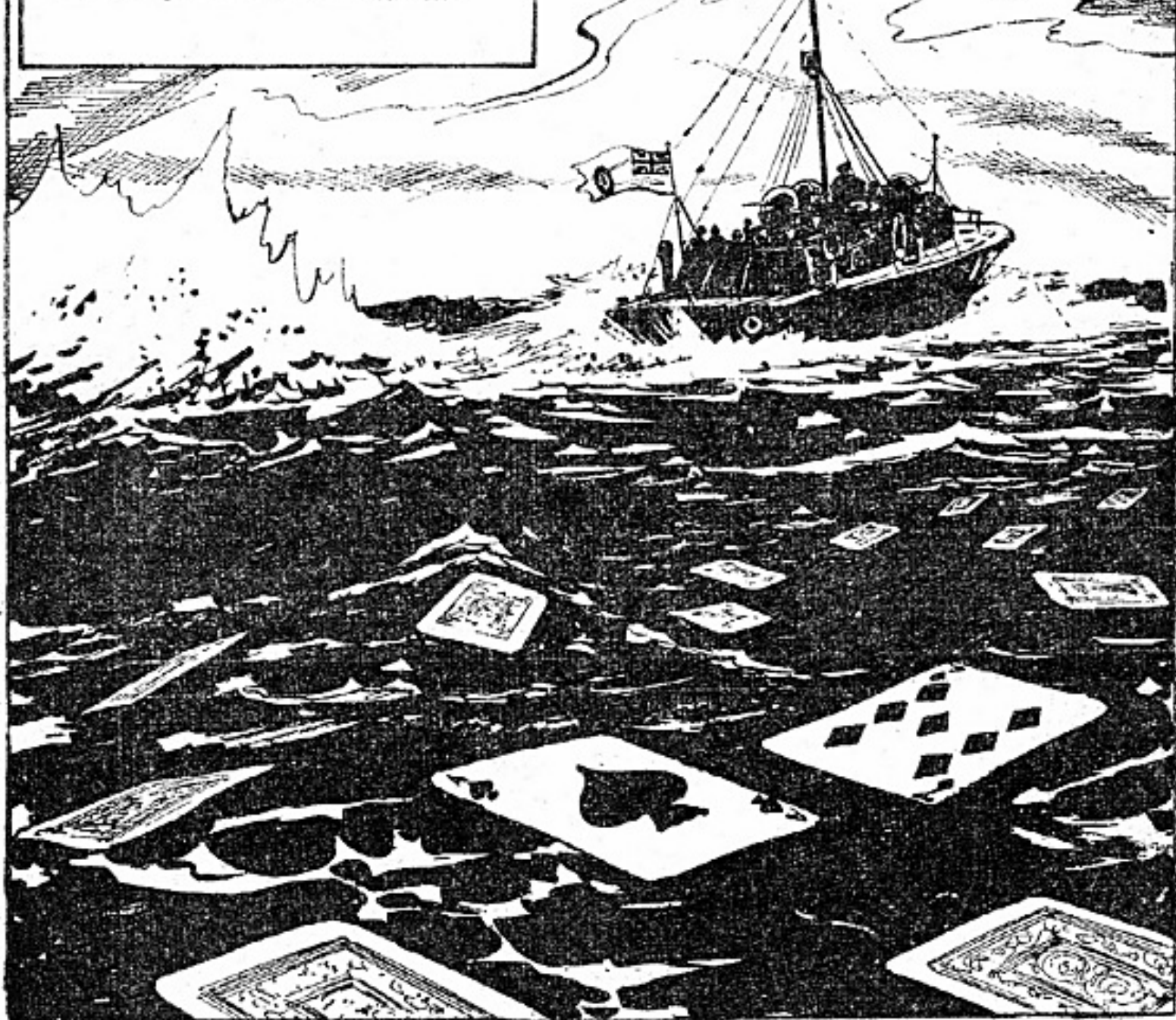
THEY FOUND THE DINGHY, BUT THERE WAS NO SIGN OF VIBART. AFTER TWENTY MINUTES, THEY WERE FORCED TO GIVE UP THE SEARCH...

POOR BLOKE! THE CARDS WERE RIGHT - FOR VIBART, AT LEAST!

OR MAYBE HE WAS JUST UNLUCKY!



PERHAPS, AS BILL WEBB SAID,  
PAUL VIBART WAS JUST  
UNLUCKY. PERHAPS THE  
CARDS MEANT NOTHING AT  
ALL. IT DID NOT OCCUR TO  
THEM THEN, THAT VIBART'S  
NAME HAD BEEN THE SEVENTH  
ON P-POPSIE'S CREW LIST...



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